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The Aesthetic Which is Not One:
The Feminist (un)Aesthetic in the Works of Caryl Churchill and Suzan Lori-Parks

by

Kathren Martin

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Accepted by:

Amy Lehman, Director of Thesis

Katherine Adams, Reader

Peter Duffy, Reader

Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

In the following essay I will establish a theatrical feminist (un)aesthetic that resists essentialism, which creates the dramaturgical space necessary to present a feminist (un)subject. The rejection of Ibsenite realism within the (un)aesthetic disrupts the male gaze as theorized by Laura Mulvey. This is achieved through a materialist feminist focus that highlights the constructive nature of gender difference and disrupts the production of “woman” as sign. Through the use of Brechtian alienation techniques and theatrical formalism, the playwrights Caryl Churchill (*Cloud Nine*) and Suzan-Lori Parks (*Venus*) force the feminist goals of the (un)aesthetic to be considered beyond the context of the theatrical event. I will demonstrate that both Churchill and Parks successfully present an (un)subject in becoming, that is based on a representational economy of refusal. By refusing traditional subject formation both playwrights are able to trouble and destabilize the patriarchal metanarrative of feminine subjectivity within theatrical representation.

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CHAPTER 1

READING THE THEORETICAL ROAD MAP: PROBLEMATIZING THE DEFINITION OF A FEMINIST AESTHETIC

The institution of Western theatre, since the age of Ancient Greece, has been dominated by hetero-patriarchal ideologies and cultural practices. The cultural institution of theatre has served not only to reproduce hetero-patriarchal ideology but to naturalize it as well. This hierarchical ordering of gender difference has been continually reinforced by the creation of cultural goods such as theatrical texts and performances. However, in any system of cultural ideology exists room for interjections and challenges from an antagonistic counter culture. In this essay I will examine the effects of a feminist counter culture on the reproduction of dominant ideologies through the practice of theatre. What makes theatre feminist? Is it possible to define a theoretical feminist aesthetic? I will answer these question by establishing a materialist feminist theatrical (un)aesthetic based on a signifying economy of refusal.

I will argue that Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* and Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* are affective models of my theorization of an (un)aesthetic. In my reading of *Cloud Nine* and *Venus* as dramatic literature I will analyze the structure and dramaturgical form of each as well as the subject position of each of the play's female protagonists. The feminist theoretical leanings of both playwrights, as expressed in their dramaturgy, is representative of the feminist (un)aesthetic. Both playwrights deconstruct the

social construction of gender difference through narrative interventions. By utilizing Brechtian elements and refusing realism, Churchill and Parks are able to present a feminist (un)subject which refuses traditional subject creation. I will make the claim that *Cloud Nine* and *Venus* present readers and audience members with an effective model of a socially conscious feminist theatre (un)aesthetic as translated into praxis, because they compel the audience to carry the political message into a larger cultural context.

I have chosen Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* and Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* as effective models of the (un)aesthetic due to the canonized status of both play texts and playwrights. Due to the canonized status of both playwrights their work is read and seen by a larger audience. This increases the cultural power of the feminist leanings of both playwrights increasing their efficacy in enacting cultural change. Although, both Churchill and Parks have become canonized authors they maintain a subversive quality through their refusal to stage "woman" and an intentional manipulation of traditional theatrical semiotics. The use of theatrical formalism and Brechtian techniques by Churchill and Parks connects the political message of their theater to society as a whole. In The Plays of Caryl Churchill, Amelia Howe Kritzer notes the effects of Churchill's theatricality. According to Kritzer Churchill's formalism, "energizes the process of open-ended questioning that empowers audiences to ask further questions and seek satisfactory answers in the world outside the theatre" (1). Both playwrights provide little meta commentary about their writing. In an interview with Shelby Jiggetts, Parks explains compares her own work to a road map that readers, directors, and audience members are free to read in anyway they see fit. According to Parks, "what I try to do is say there are 10 roads, 20, 50 roads-take one. I get a kick out of just seeing what people

do. I think that the playwright provides the map. But I think a bad play only has a one-way road” (Jiggetts 312). The open quality of both play texts due to the lack of meta commentary resists the essentialism of female playwrights which serves to reinforce patriarchal theatrical and cultural practices.

Symbolic expression, such as theatrical performances and dramatic literature, can serve to legitimize as well as destabilize cultural hegemony because hegemony exists in a constant state of incompleteness. The creation of cultural goods, such as theatre, by the dominant class serves to naturalize their hold on power and the cultural hierarchy that power creates. How can theatre be used as tool by feminists? Antonio Gramsci’s Marxist theorization of cultural hegemony is based on the assumption that cultural hegemony works through the “intellectual and moral leadership” of the dominant class rather than the imposition of force (McConachie 40). Bruce A. McConachie in his article “Using the Concept of Cultural Hegemony to Write Theatre History” notes that Gramsci does not provide a clear definition of cultural hegemony. However, according to McConachie, “Gramsci’s notion of hegemony-broadly speaking, domination by consent-nicely captures the structured complex of ruling-class power and popular opposition, specifying both the limits and the possibilities of insurgency from below” (38). Because cultural hegemony works through “domination by consent,” it exists in a state of constant recreation which reinforces and legitimizes cultural notions. Both Gramsci and McConachie note the importance of language, including visual and gestural semantics, as the primary producer of a cultural base knowledge. Language serves to reinforce the notions of the dominant culture’s ideology which provides the basis for cultural hegemony. According to McConachie, “Language [Gramsci] believes, massively shapes

a social group's ideology and culture, a term which [Gramsci] loosely defines as a 'way of feeling and seeing reality'" (41). This theorization of cultural hegemony as a product and producer of language and rhetoric provides the foundation of the semiotic study of theatrical language that can provide feminist theatre practitioners a strong foothold in their attempts to create "insurgency from below" (McConachie 38).

The materialist feminist strand of feminism lends itself to theatrical production and critique because it empowers the theatre as an agent of change through its connection to the material. The materialist feminist focus on gender as cultural creation and a product of a material moment can be transformed into an agent of change when coupled with Gramsci's theorization of cultural hegemony and the practice of creating cultural goods. In "The Feminist Spectator as Critic," Jill Dolan succinctly explains the major precepts of feminism. According to Dolan, "Feminism begins with a keen awareness of exclusion from male cultural, social, sexual, political, and intellectual discourse. It is a critique of prevailing *social conditions* that formulate women's position outside of dominant male discourse," (emphasis added) (3). The examination of "social conditions" I believe points a feminist theatre toward a materialist feminist discourse due to its focus on the historical material moment. Although there are many different feminisms with expressly different goals and understandings of woman's oppression "feminism" in the context of this essay will refer specifically to Western materialist feminist ideologies and practices. I privilege this feminist position due to its compatibility with the dramaturgy of Churchill and Parks as well as the theatrical theory of Brecht. In the introduction to An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre, Elaine Aston defines material feminism. According to Aston, "materialist feminism has now been widely adopted as the

nomenclature for the theoretical position which in the 1970s was labeled as Marxist or socialist feminism. This position critiques the historical and material conditions of class, race and gender oppression and demands the radical transformation of social structures”

(9). The meta-narrative of theatre is a male-dominated discourse, therefore use of feminist materialist theories can create a radical transformation of cultural hegemony through the deconstruction of the social creation of “woman” as a class and category.

In order to attempt to define a feminist theatrical aesthetic the term has to be explained as a problematic. The term aesthetic also seems to impose problems for feminism. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the noun aesthetic as “a set of ideas or opinions about beauty or art.” The set and unchangeable quality of the term aesthetic works counter to the self-reflexive and self-critiquing nature of a living feminism. The intellectual and removed quality of a defined aesthetic also works against a materialist feminist desire to create “radical transformation of social structures.” As Laughlin and Schuler explain, “As feminists, we are hardly interested in championing a detached, supposedly objective contemplation of the ethereal realm of art or in perpetuating the essentially white, bourgeois, heterosexist, and patriarchal ideology represented by traditional aesthetics” (10). How then can a feminist theatre writer, critic, or audience member create a space for the creation of a feminist theatrical experience? As with all feminist activities, defining a feminist aesthetic runs the risk of providing essentialist models that can be then absorbed by the patriarchy, then used to reinforce the oppression of women and their exclusion from cultural productions. In the introduction to Theatre and Feminist Aesthetics, Karen Laughlin and Catherine Schuler provide a chronological look at the historical process of theorizing a feminist theatrical aesthetic. According to

Laughlin and Schuler, in the late 1970s and early 1980s Western feminist theorists studying the works of women writers were “seeking to describe a specific women’s language that might help explain the uniqueness of women’s art...it wasn’t long, however, before such efforts came under fire from feminist critics for their presumed essentialism” (10).

I propose a feminist (un)aesthetic that resists essentialism and the prescriptive nature of an aesthetic system. In my study of Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* and Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus* I will read the scripts as dramatic literature that exemplifies the (un)aesthetic. By using semiotics, materialism, film theory, psychoanalysis and feminist theory to deconstruct the way “woman” is created and read as a sign in the theatrical context I will determine how theatrical form and feminine subjectivity can be used to serve feminist ends. In this reading I will look at the way the dramatic form of the play as text as well as the subject position created for its female protagonist provides a subversive deconstruction of hegemonic theatrical practices. By deconstructing these two literary devices I will present a feminist (un)aesthetic which will build on Laughlin and Schuler’s definition of a feminist aesthetic, “based not on a ‘feminine style’ or the recuperation of a female tradition but on a radical critique of existing modes of theatre and theatrical criticism” (11). The goal of this critique is not to create a prescriptive list of what should be used by feminist theatre practitioners but rather to suggest techniques that when used in harmony can create a theatrical interjection in the traditional illusionistic Western theatre canon. In the study of form and subjectivity I will blend the work of theatrical, film, and feminist theorists to deconstruct the way feminist theatre creates meaning within its unique sign system. In borrowing from the disciplines of

literary and film studies I am in keeping with the tradition of feminist theatre theory. As Elaine Austin notes, “As theatre studies was a late developer and the impact of feminism came much later than in other studies, feminist critical theory in theatre began by ‘borrowing’ from feminist projects in related disciplines,” (5).

The theatrical form of realism does not allow for the presentation of a refusing (un)subject. Therefore, the (un)aesthetic rejects the signification system to theatrical realism. Theatrical feminist theorist Elin Diamond finds the historical development of the theatrical form of realism to be problematic for feminist theatre practitioners and theorists. Her deconstruction of the historical moment in which Realism began to become the dominant theatrical form supports this claim. According to Diamond the advancement of Ibsenite realism is ideologically bound to Freud and Breuer’s Studies on Hysteria, which creates a gendered etiology of hysteria. In Unmaking Mimesis Diamond claims, “In deciphering the hysteric’s enigma realism celebrates positivist inquiry, thus buttressing its claim for ‘truth of life’” (94). According to Diamond, the spread of Ibsenite realism and Studies on Hysteria are the cultural products of the same material moment of and therefore continually reinforce and reinscribe the values and hegemony of the end of the nineteenth century.

Diamond makes connections between the two entities in “Realism’s Hysteria:” “What I am pointing to is a discursive formation whose fields of enunciation are the new science of psychoanalysis and the new ‘sex-problem play,’ both at the end of the nineteenth century, both targeting ‘the women with a past’” (4). McConachie’s theorization of the connection between cultural hegemony and the theatre fortifies Diamond’s claim. When the material moment of the end of the nineteenth century is

further considered it becomes clear that both Ibsenite realism and Studies on Hysteria developed as means by which the dominant order of the nineteenth century stabilized and reinforced its ideology in the face of societal forces that had the potential to disrupt the gender division ideology which served their own interests. Diamond concludes that “Ibsenite realism guarantees its legitimacy by endowing the fallen woman of popular melodrama with the symptoms and etiology of the hysteria...in effect hysteria provides stage realism with one of its richest and, ideologically, most satisfying plots” (4).

The canonized illusionistic realism of Western theatre creates woman as a sign due to its form which serves to mystify its structures. Elin Diamond calls for a complete rejection of the traditional theatrical forms of realism not only due to its hysterical formation but also for its ability to construct the natural present. In “Realism’s Hysteria” Diamond continues to deconstruct the operations of theatrical realism by examining the formal elements of the genre that create the theatrical contract that creates the illusion that what the audience is being presented with is reality. According to Diamond, “With the box-set and picture frame stage...realism could carve out a *natural present*; the walls of the family drawing room and later the family living room, particularly the fourth wall, create the only space for breathing what Zola calls ‘the free air of reality’” (emphasis added) (4). The sense of reality that is created through the manipulation of the audience’s view forces the audience to accept what it sees on stage as true. Therefore the theatrical presentation of realism reinforces the arrangement of the world of the play, which is constructed to be a perfect representation of the “natural present.” This serves to reinscribe the patriarchy of the natural present. The rejection of the arrangement of realism which utilizes the fourth wall and proscenium staging which, “reinforce the

pleasures of perspectival space, in which each object has a has a measured and appropriate position within the whole-a 'whole' produced by a 'single immobile eye [I],' positioned to see/know the relations between, and meaning of the objects in view," is the first step to using a feminist (un)aesthetic (5). In, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema Laura Mulvey further deconstructs the effects of the "immobile eye [I]" of realism for feminist ends.

Realism promotes a gendered process of subject creation in which "women" are constructed as a sign. Laura Mulvey uses psychoanalysis to explain the way women in film are constructed as signification of meaning by the structured view of the narrative cinema and stage realism. Like the proscenium arch and the box set of stage realism, the use of the camera in narrative cinema produces an "immobile eye [I] which structures the meaning of objects within its view." In Visual Pleasure in the Narrative Cinema, Mulvey combines the psychoanalytic theoretical tradition of Freud and Lacan with a semiotic analysis of the films of Alfred Hitchcock. Mulvey goes on to note the way the dynamics of realism are connected to desire. According to Mulvey, "Conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world. Among other things, the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of repressed desire onto the performer" (61). While a audience watches a film or theatrical performance, it occupies an active role in the creation of the meaning of the representation that is presented for it. Mulvey's reading of the sign system of illusionistic narrative-based cinema through psychoanalytic theory is focused on the gendered desire of the audience's gaze.

The form of realism which is based on a climactic and linear plot structure restricts the way an audience reads “woman” into a passive and conquerable actor through the manipulation of the its gaze. Through her analysis Mulvey notes the ways in which the form of illusionistic narrative cinema creates meaning for the audience which affects the reading of “woman” as sign in the material culture at large. As Mulvey notes in Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, “Woman as representation signifies castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat. None of these interacting layers are intrinsic to film, but it is only in film form that they can reach a perfect and beautiful contradiction, thanks to the possibility in the cinema of shifting the emphasis of the look,” as previously noted stage realism also controls the look through framing devices and therefore her principles apply to the stage as well (67). This leads to increased recognition (and, therefore misrecognition, as Lacan notes) and identification with the characters that allow the performance to be read as real. Thus, performance itself becomes a sign of the dominant ideology, and the performers becomes signs of the repressed desires of the spectator. According to Mulvey, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly” (62).

The formation of realism as a form as well as the devices used to present it serve to present the patriarchy of culture as the truth of reality. Therefore, the (un)aesthetic bulid on Mulvey’s conceptualization of the nature of the gaze as always gendered and always male due to the structures of realism, even if the spectator is a woman, . It therefore comes as no surprise that even the female spectator’s vision is forced through

the “immobile eye [I]” which causes the misrecognition of the sign “woman” to be her likeness. According to Ellen A. Kaplan in “Both Sides of the Camera,” “the problem is that, as female, her desire has no power. The reversal of roles keeps the underlying structures of dominance and submission intact. The gaze is not essentially male but, “to own and activate the gaze given our language and the structure of unconsciousness, is to be in the ‘masculine’ position” (30). A feminist (un)aesthetic therefore seeks to deconstruct and destabilize the monolithic theatrical mode of realism. The gendered nature of the gaze creates an uneven and hierarchical representational economy. This economy insists on a single truth that must be believed by the audience. This single truth creates fixed meanings and values through its use of ideologically and interpretatively closed texts. Elin Diamond summarizes a need for a rejection of realism by feminists in Unmaking Mimesis, “Realism is more than an interpretation of reality passing as reality; it produces ‘reality’ by positioning its spectator to recognize and verify *its* truths” (emphasis added) (4). Any alternative form could serve to counter the construction of the reality gaze, which forces its audience to look through the male gaze and a single unchanging ideological framework.

The fixity of the “immobile eye [I]” bars women and feminists from taking up its discourse. Feminism’s ever changing self-reflexive nature stems directly from the way gender exists in a state of continuous becoming. As cultural values change, the cultural coding of gender shifts and this changes the way gender is presented by individuals as well as within the broader cultural context. In “Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, Foucault,” Judith Butler theorizes identity and gender as cultural constructions that form and reform in a state of constant process. Butler views gender as a project or

never-ending process that is a function of a broader cultural system. As Rosalind C. Morris states in her article “All Made Up: Performance Theory and the New Anthropology of Sex and Gender,” “Under the influence of Butler’s rereading of Austin’s speech act theory, the process by which difference and identity are constructed in and through the discourses of sexuality is referred to increasingly as gender performativity” (Morris, 569). Because gender identity is an evolutionary process, feminism itself is not a static conceptualization. Therefore, feminist concerns and goals cannot be met through a representational system that promotes an ultimate truth and static construction of meaning. On a semiotic level feminism cannot use the vocabulary of this theatrical form.

Feminist theatrical theorists and practitioners must construct a representational form and language which deconstructs the canonized theatrical language of realism. The feminist (un)aesthetic builds on feminist theories Luce Irigaray to further deconstruct patriarchal language. In “The Sex Which is Not One,” Irigaray performs a radical rereading of Freud and Lacan and asserts that women’s desires speaks a different language than that of men. According to Irigaray the labia and clitoris of a woman create a “two-ness” of desire which is inexpressible through the gendered language of desire and patriarchy. This “two-ness” which cannot be classified as one runs parallel to Butler’s conceptualization of identity and extends it into the semiotic realm. According to Irigaray, “One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an ‘other meaning’ always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed or congealed by them,” the representation of a feminine desire is resistant to becoming fixed (29). Irigaray’s writing is demonstrative of the fluidity and circular language of women. The repetitious and

revisionist wordplay of her writing express the “two-ness” of women and the performativity of gender. A feminist (un)aesthetic should express the same qualities while remaining an open and self-critiquing system that does not become “fixed or congealed” within systematic boundaries. The masculine desire is articulated through the form of illusionistic realism as noted by Mulvey and Diamond. Irigaray notes that the misreading of “women” and their desire stems from reading through the language of masculine desire, “whereas [feminine desire] really involves a different economy more than anything else, one that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse” (30). How can this different economy translate into the language of theatrical representations?

A drastic reformation of theatrical language is necessary to disrupt the active/subject passive/object formation that creates the gendered economy of traditional theatrical language. A simple reversal of the subject/object binary does not create the narrative space necessary for the (un)aesthetic. According to Mary Ann Doane in her article “Woman’s Stake: Filming the Female Body,” the illusionistic narrative cinema serves to reaffirm the ideology of patriarchy because “there are no images either *for* her or *of* her” (emphasis in original); this lack holds true for theatre as well (22). However, does the insertion of women into a subject position in theatrical texts and their audiences guarantee that their images will be, “*for* her or *of* her?” In her article “American Drama, Feminist Discourse and Dramatic Form: A Defense of Critical Pluralism,” Patricia R. Schroeder argues against a one-dimensional approach to defining a feminist aesthetic via subjectivity. Schroeder argues that “focusing exclusively on woman as dramatic

protagonist oversimplifies the problem of defining feminist drama.” To support this claim she deconstructs the text of Wendy Wasserstein’s *The Heidi Chronicles* (1989). Heidi Holland is the subject of the piece and is described as a feminist art historian, “Yet the work is anti-feminist in a number of ways...Heidi herself is primarily a passive observer of others’ lives rather than a dynamic shaper of her own” (69). Why does Wasserstein’s dramaturgy fail to fulfill the goals of a feminist theatrical (un)aesthetic? The use of Heidi as a protagonist remains a cosmetic change because it does nothing to deconstruct or disrupt the gendered way that she is created as subject. Schroeder notes the traditional passivity of Heidi despite her insertion into the role of subject. Although *The Heidi Chronicles* reached critical acclaim and a canonized status in volumes of “feminist” plays, “underneath the surface the play remains (as Moria Hodgson describes it) ‘harmless ...perfect for Broadway since there is nothing in it to offend or deeply shake up the house’” (Schroeder 69). In order to explain and circumvent the theatrical shortcomings of *The Heidi Chronicles* the feminist (un)aesthetic looks to feminist theorists such as Spivak, de Lauretis and Halberstam for guidance in deconstructing subjectivity.

The feminist (un)aesthetic cannot succeed in creating “the radical transformation of social structures” called for by material feminists while searching for ways to grant women traditional subject roles in the theatre and thus the larger cultural context (Aston 9). In her article, “Can The Subaltern Speak?”, Gayatri Spivak explores the ways in which subjectivity is denied to members of identity categories that are othered and oppressed within systems of hierarchical power (like the sign system of theatrical realism). In Spivak’s theorization of the subaltern the category of woman becomes a

political position rather than an identity. The formation of woman as a political position corresponds to the materialist feminist focus on women as a class that is formulated by the cultural conditions (such as her representation within theatrical language). Spivak is doubtful that it is possible for The Subaltern to speak or to represent herself in ways that are not recreating and reinforcing the systems of domination and oppression. As Spivak notes, “There is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak,” within traditionally structured cultural discourse(103). The Irigarayan “two-ness” is mutually constitutive with the relation to power that is conceptualized by Spivak and applied to representation in film by Mulvey and in the theatre by Diamond. A successful feminist theatrical (un)aesthetic should follow Spivak’s conclusion that “the subaltern cannot speak,” and reject methods that seek to simply reverse the active/passive, subject/object theatrical language of realism (104). As Audre Lorde notes in *Sister Outsider*, “for the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (110). This sentiment is reinforced by the review of *The Heidi Chronicles*. What are the alternatives suggested by a feminist (un)aesthetic?

Rather than attempt to create the illusion of reality, feminist theatre practitioners align themselves with the tradition of formalism which foregrounds the performative nature of theatre. The realism of the mainstream cinema and theatre creates a sign system that seeks to hide its own artificiality. (Mulvey and Diamond explain how this process occurs as previously noted.) As John Berger notes in Ways of Seeing, “Mystification is the process of explaining away what might otherwise be present.” Feminist formalism as a part of a larger (un)aesthetic can be used to prevent the explaining away of the gendered

nature of realistic subject formation (15). In “Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema,” Teresa de Lauretis calls for the creation of a feminist de-aesthetic which can be used in the cinema and the theatre as “a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured [representational] form” (57). In order to deconstruct and unsubscribe to the masculine “well-made play structure” de Lauretis turns to formalism. De Lauretis studies *Born in Flames*, a documentary-style film from 1983 by Lizzie Borden. The formalism used in the film through its “short burst” style of editing creates a narrative structure that rejects the economy of traditional realism. The narrative of the film or its “central story” is intentionally obscured by the filmmaker. There is not a clear progression of easily legible scenes due to the technical process of the film’s construction. According to de Lauretis, this type of formalism deconstructs the ways in which traditional mis-en-scene narrative cinema creates meaning and confidently displays the inner workings of its own semiotic system.

The deconstruction of form also deconstructs the way the subject position is constructed within the narrative. The “short burst” style, described by de Lauretis’ de-aesthetic, can also be achieved in theatrical productions. In, “Feminist Theory of Theatre,” Patti P. Gillespie notes that “Contemporary female playwrights often abandoned causally organized plots and psychologically driven characters in favor of plays described with words like *circular, modular, contiguous* or with images like *patchwork, quilted, web-like, montage*” (112). These descriptions of the work of contemporary female playwrights mirror the description of the feminine language of desire as described by Irigaray as “always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words,” but is subjectivity affected (29)? When the audience is not allowed

the comfort of a traditional theatrical language they are more likely to think about the ways meaning is created by the performance. According to de Lauretis, *Born in Flames* is successful in presenting a female protagonist who is continually created “just as the film’s narrative remains unresolved, fragmented and difficult to follow, heterogeneity and difference among women remain in our memory as the film’s narrative image, its working of representing, which cannot be collapsed into a fixed identity... nevertheless, to some, those images of women appear to be extraordinarily beautiful,” which points back to the problem of subjectivity (174). Deconstructive formalism alone does not offer an alternative avenue for subject creation. A feminist (un)aesthetic then should encompass the formalism called for by de Lauretis and the affecting language of Irigaray while turning to other sources for strategies of subject creation.

The de-aesthetic proposed by de Lauretis entails a new way of creating meaning through a deconstructive formalism. However, formalism and deconstruction have little effect on the gendered meaning of aesthetic subjects. Although the quilted dramaturgy of non-linear plots demonstrates the “gender in process” theorization of Butler, it seems the subalterns are still being forced to speak. The de-subject of the de-aesthetic still relies on the mode of traditional subject/object formation as it reverses it. However, feminist theatre theorists and practitioners may find a more satisfying theorization of subjectivity in the work of Jack Halberstam. In his study of the work of performance artist Marina Abramovic, entitled “The Artist is Object,” Jack Halberstam claims to have found such a feminine de-subject or as he calls it the “un-subject.” Halberstam explores the theoretical line of shadow feminism as it applies to the representations of the artist in the work of Abramovic. According to Halberstam, “In this genre we find no ‘feminist subjects’ but

only un-subjects who cannot speak, who refuse to speak; subjects who unravel, who refuse to cohere; subjects who refuse ‘being’” (3). The difference between the un-subject of Abramovic’s pieces explored in “The Artist is Present” and the “unresolved/fragmented/becoming” subject of Borden’s *Born in Flames* may seem to be a matter of phrasing. However, phrasing and language create meaning, and in this case, the slight difference in language creates a very different goal in the representation of women. At the heart of Halberstam’s theorization of the un-subject lies refusal.

This refusal can be co-opted by the feminist theatre, and when combined with formalism results in a theoretical (un)aesthetic. Halberstam’s theorization of shadow feminism and the un-subject “stages a refusal to become woman and that locates this refusal deep in the heart of the masochistic pain/pleasure dynamic” (3). The use of formalist techniques in the theatre may help to present an un-subject, but it seems that the success of Abramovic as theorized by Halberstam is very dependent on the avant-garde language of performance art. Although performance art is sometimes thought of as an offshoot of theatre, the two forms operate within very different semiotic systems. In her book, Staging Femininities: Performance and Performativity, Geraldine Harris focuses primarily on feminist performance art and artists. Harris cites Bert O. States’ explanation of the difference between the two mediums: “There is one huge respect in which performance as used in the term performance art signifies something different from its meaning under normative circumstances (say of the theatre)...performance art was, and to great degree still is, aimed at deconstructing the normal assumptions of traditional theatre” (30). One of the ways performance art deconstructs theatre is by using the body and movement as its predominant sign system rather than the spoken word and written

text of theatre. Abramovic's piece "Nude with Skeleton" creates a representation of femininity through a female performer lying naked behind a skeleton. Although the performer occasionally makes eye contact with her audience, the type of connection does not create identification. Halberstam notes that this masochistic body-based language depends on "looking but not looking, seeing but not seeing, connecting but not connecting" (5). How can this intentionally self-conscious refusal be achieved in the textual-based theatre?

Feminist theatre artists can turn to Bertolt Brecht in order to create a performance-based sign system that combines the text-based language of theatre, the formalism of de Lauretis, and the modality of "connecting but not connecting" of Halberstam. Patricia Schroder notes the unlikely yet fruitful coupling of material feminism and the Epic Theatre of Bertolt Brecht in her article "American Drama, Feminist Discourse and Dramatic Form: A Defense of Critical Pluralism." According to Schroeder, "Materialist feminists have appropriated certain preexisting dramatic models which they see as empowering feminists to portray a female split subject. Of particular importance to their work is Bertolt Brecht" (75). The Epic Theatre of Brecht is commonly described as a socially conscious theatre that is more focused on creating an active thinking audience than the emotional audience seeking catharsis from traditional Aristotelian drama. In Oscar G. Brockett's History of the Theatre, he describes the Epic Theatre and the goals of Brechtian theory: "He wished to assign audiences an active role in the theatre by making them watch critically... consequently, he arrived at the concept of 'alienation' (verfremdungseffekt), or making stage events seem sufficiently strange that the spectator will ask questions about them" (469). The "a-effect," as it is commonly called, was used

by Brecht to address socioeconomic conditions in the outside world and like most Marxists he did not address gender division. However, feminist theatre theory often borrows from his canon of theatrical devices to create an alienation effect such as the historization and gestic image. When coupled with formalism, these can create a feminist (un)subject as presented through an (un)aesthetic.

The “a-effect” when applied to a feminist theatrical context presents many ways to create an (un)subject as well as a formalist theatrical contract. In Unmaking Mimesis Elin Diamond notes the way traditional Stanislavski-based acting technique serves to naturalize the characters of a theatrical piece. According to Diamond, in the traditional realistic Stanislavski method approach to acting, “the actor/signifier, laminated to her character/signified, strenuously seeks admission to the right class of referents...because it naturalizes the relation between character and actor, setting and world, realism works in concert with ideology” (4). Brechtian acting technique serves to demystify the relationship between actor and character. This technique can serve the feminist pursuit of the (un)subject position within textually based theatre. Brecht drew inspiration from China’s highly stylized and symbolic acting style that was not influenced by Stanislavski’s *System*. In “On Chinese Acting” Brecht explains how the Chinese performer achieves alienation: “the Chinese performer does not act ‘as if,’ in addition to the three walls around him, there was also a fourth wall. He makes it clear that he knows he is being looked at” (130). This prevents the mystification of Realism, by keeping the audience and actor engaged in active meaning creation on a conscious level. As Brecht explains, this allows the actor to openly manipulate the gaze of the audience, “As openly as acrobats the actors can choose those positions which show them off to best advantage”

(131). Within the (un)aesthetic an actor could use this technique to achieve the distance necessary to comment about their character in a style that is often referred to as the “not/but” style. By staging a dialogue of commentary about their character the actor asks the audience to do the same. From this distance a theatrical actor could achieve the subjectivity based on refusal theorized for performance art by Halbertsam, as expressed through the (un)subject.

Other Brechtian theatrical devices like cross-gender casting and historization can also serve to reinforce the theatricality of a performance and create “both new prescriptions of gender and new explanations of its implications” (Gillespie 111). The formalism of both of these devices brings the concept of “prescriptions” to the forefront of a feminist dramaturgy. The use of cross-gender casting makes clear the ways in which cultural and theatrical discourses write gender onto bodies. Rather than neutrally accepting the gender of a character the actor works to comment on it, which allows the audience to question its construction. As Elin Diamond notes in “(In)Visible Bodies in Churchill’s Theatre,” by using cross-gender casting, feminist theatre practitioners are able to create a dramaturgy where “there is no ‘writing the body,’ but rather a foregrounding of the apparatus that makes the writing possible” (191). Placement of the dramatic action in a time period removed from what Diamond calls the “natural present” of realism can also serve to disrupt the mystification of realism and contribute to the alienation affect. When approached with feminist alienation in mind historically situated plays can serve to make the archaic treatment of gender in the play’s time period seem odd. However when coupled with other forms of the feminist (un)aesthetic such as the (un)subject and a “not/but” acting style, historization may serve more to make the past strangely familiar.

By foregrounding the social construction of gender within the historical time period the alienating actor prevents audiences “from identifying emotionally with any single action or character, but are encouraged to make connections between a previous historical moment and their own” ((In) Visible 193). Cross-gender casting and historization can be used within the (un)aesthetic to disrupt traditional narrativity and create the space needed to present the (un)subject.

The gestic image of Brecht’s Epic Theatre provides the culmination of the (un)aesthetics devices. In her article “Brecht and the Mothers of Epic Theatre,” Iris Smith explains the power of gestus and the gestic image: “Gestus attempts to energize the spectator to continue the work of the text outside of the theatre. This program would seem tailor-made for feminists” (493). Gestus is only possible in performances and play texts that use many different elements of alienation. In order to create such a powerful images a play must utilize many of the elements of the (un)aesthetic such as, the (un)subject, non-realistic formalism, alienation and historization. In Unmaking Mimesis, Elin Diamond describes gestus as only achievable through a synthesis of theatrical devices. According to Diamond gestus is “a gesture, a word, an action, a tableau, by which separately or in a series the social attitudes encoded in the playtext become visible to the spectator” (52). The gestus is expressed through a gestic image which is a highly complex and contradictory moment. In Brecht on Theatre the complexity of such a moment is stressed. Brecht warns that all elements must be expressed fully; “[Gestus] cannot be rendered in a single word and the actor must take care that in giving his image the necessary emphasis he does not lose anything, but emphasizes the entire complex” (198). When a gestic image is successful it transcends the playtext and extends the

commentary of the play into the historical moment of the performance. It can be thought of as an image that summarizes the social and political forces surrounding a play's characters, its spectators, and its performance. This synthesizing technique when used within the feminist (un)aesthetic can ensure the feminist concerns of a piece of theatre do not stop at the stage house door. Elin Diamond notes, "If we read feminist concerns back into this discussion, the *gestus* signifies a moment of theoretical insight into the sex-gender complexities not only in the play's 'fable' but in the culture which the play, at the moment of reception, is dialogically reflecting and shaping" (53).

The Epic Theatre of Bertolt Brecht provides a set of staging techniques that can be used by theatre artists to perform the theoretical discourse of feminism. However, without the theoretical knowledge of Spivak, Irigaray, and Halberstam, the techniques of Brecht will not serve to further feminist goals. By combining theoretical knowledge offered by feminism with the theatrical theory of Schroeder, Gillespie, Diamond, and Brecht, I propose a feminist (un)aesthetic. However, as theory and theatre continue to advance the (un)aesthetic will continue to critique itself, grow and change. The following critique of Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* and Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* will demonstrate the fluidity of the (un)aesthetic. Every element discussed above will not appear in both plays; however, the playwright's concern for the material connects to the material-feminist concerns and goals of the (un)aesthetic. I will argue that both playwrights use elements of the (un)aesthetic to feminist ends and create a dramaturgy that implicate the audience and compels their carrying of the message into a larger cultural context. Both Churchill and Parks create a feminist dramaturgy that informs the

theatrical event and, in the words of Elin Diamond, “exceeds the play, opening it to the social and discursive ideologies that inform its production” (Mimesis 53).

CHAPTER 2

THE CREATION OF AN IRIGARAYAN THEATRICAL LANGUAGE?

CARYL CHURCHILL'S FEMINISM FROM ACROSS THE POND IN *CLOUD NINE*

Caryl Churchill describes her ideal society as “decentralized, non-authoritarian, communist, non-sexist—a society in which people can be in touch with their feelings, and in control of their own lives” (Aston & Diamond 2). Churchill’s materialist feminist leanings are a product of the material moment in which she was writing. In order to determine the efficacy of Churchill’s attempts to achieve this dramaturgical goal the political climate of British feminism in the 1970s both theoretically and theatrically must be considered. Placing *Cloud Nine* in the material context of “second wave” feminism¹ allows the dramatic work to be measured against the cultural definitions of feminism in which Churchill was writing. This framing allows her techniques to be considered within the feminist (un)aesthetic’s conceptualization of subjectivity and form. The impact of second wave feminism can be most clearly seen through the highly theatrical and playful process through which *Cloud Nine* was written. The workshop process with Joint Stock Theatre Group provided rich material for Churchill which, due to its autobiographical nature², anchors the feminism of *Cloud Nine* to the social and political realities of England in the mid to late 1970s.

¹ Although this “wave” categorization of feminism is troubling to some theorists I will use the terminology to refer to feminism between the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s.

² “the starting point for our research was to talk about ourselves and share our very different attitudes and experiences...though the play’s situations and characters were not developed in the workshop, it draws deeply on this material, and I would not have written the same play without it” (Churchill 145).

The collaborative nature of the theatrical workshop which provided the source material for *Cloud Nine* allows for multiple viewpoints to be expressed regarding the sexual politics at play in England in 1978 and 1979. This writing process is in keeping with Churchill's desire for a nonhierarchical reality and creates the space necessary to express a multiplicitous view on not only the theatrical form but on gender identity as well. In her introduction to *Cloud Nine*, Caryl Churchill describes the workshop process used to inspire the final dramatic text. According to Churchill her work with Joint Stock followed in the group's workshop tradition. "The company's usual work method is to set up a workshop in which the writer, director and actors research a particular subject...the workshop for *Cloud Nine* was about sexual politics;" this focus influenced Churchill's final script (146). After working together on exercises that explored this issue in a workshop setting that lasted three weeks, Churchill left the workshop for a private writing period of twelve weeks. The material from the workshop represents the highly personal experiences of the participants with sexual politics. By embodying the "personal as political" platform of second wave feminism Churchill creates a theatrical space that challenges and deconstructs patriarchal notions of sexuality and femininity. According to Churchill, "This meant that the starting point for our research was to talk about ourselves and share our very different attitudes and experiences...though the play's situations and characters were not developed in the workshop, it draws deeply on this material, and I would not have written the same play without it" (145).

The inclusive nature of the workshop with Joint Stock Theatre Group provided its participants with an empowering and revolutionary experience. Performative exercises encouraged the participants to enact their views and experiences involving sexual

politics. The workshop's focus on the enacted is in keeping with the performative nature of gender, which is stressed by Butler and which forms the backbone of the goal of the feminist (un)aesthetic. Liberation was achieved through exercises that explored stereotypes and utilized role-reversing improvisation by bringing their constructed nature to the surface. These exercises were performed within an environment of inclusion created by the actors chosen "not only on acting ability but also on diversity of sexual identities" (Harding 258). James M. Harding explains in his article "Cloud Cover: (Re)Dressing Desire and Comfortable Subversions in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*," that the goal of the performance of *Cloud Nine* as well as its play text is to create an experience for its audience which reflects the empowering quality of the workshop itself. According to Harding, "Workshop experiences...set a standard for the play because they tended to locate the political within the realm of enactment rather than within abstractions. Indeed, in the workshop, the enacted subverted the abstracted. The hope apparently was that, when produced, Churchill's play would create a climate as compelling for the audience as the workshop had been for its participants" (259).

The environment of the workshop was one of deconstruction, in which the participants confronted the performativity of sexual politics and their own identity within that cultural system. If this is recreated by the play's literary and performance texts then it becomes easier to establish feminist intent which can be understood through the lens of the (un)aesthetic. In order to ensure that the politically conscious climate of the workshop would carry over into performative space of the theatre, the participants of the workshop were also the cast of the premiere production of *Cloud Nine* at Dartington College of Arts (1979) and the Royal Court Theatre (1980). This desire to promote a

deconstructive audience underscores Churchill's Brechtian belief in the power of individuals to carry the political message of the theatrical piece into society as a whole, which aligns her goals with those of the feminist (un)aesthetic. Amelia Howe Kritzer describes the connection between the personal and the political in "Sex and Gender," a chapter in her book The Plays of Caryl Churchill: "Churchill links personal change with large scale societal change, underscoring her belief in ordinary individuals' capacity to effect significant changes in themselves and their society" (111). In order to gauge the efficacy of this attempt I will begin with the experience of Anthony Sher, a workshop participant who played Clive in Act One and Kathy in Act Two.

Sher found that the workshop experience challenged his notion of the construction of subjectivity and claimed that it forced him to view his identity as a performance that is continually written by culturally coded sexual difference. According to Rob Ritchie, the author of the Joint Stock Book, which is quoted within Harding's article, "Anthony Sher recalls, '[H]owever liberal we each previously thought ourselves, we were now face to face with 'the others' and so many preconceptions were proving wrong" (258). Although the questioning of identity experienced by Sher could precipitate the creation of the nonhierarchical system of Churchill's and the feminist (un)aesthetic Sher's word choice, specifically "the others," is troubling, for it immediately creates a binary which invites hierarchal ordering. By framing his fellow participants as others Sher demonstrates that his view of his own sexual identity remains dependent upon conceptualizing others as "not him" or the "not normal." In this case Sher's framing of gender identity does not employ the subjectivity of refusal but rather a subjectivity of assimilation. James Harding explains the shortcomings of this conceptualization: "What Sher characterizes as

liberal identity pivots on a notion of acceptance that recasts the unfamiliar in familiar terms...the other becomes like so that one's own subjectivity does not become different" (259).

Harding goes on to note examples where homosexual desires are swept under the rug by a replacement presentation of heterosexual desire, which would connect the effect of the dramatic moments of the script with the effect of the dramatic games of the workshop. In Act Two, Scene Two of *Cloud Nine*, Ellen and Betty kiss each other as an expression of the lesbian desire which cannot be enacted within the language of hetero-patriarchy. Betty is confessing to Ellen that she is in love with Harry while Ellen enacts her own lesbian desire for Betty. The women then enact a version of the heterosexual love script with the subversive sexuality of Ellen's desire in the role of the man.

“Ellen: How do you know that you love him?

Betty: I kissed him.

Ellen: Betty.

Betty: He held my hand like this. Oh I want him to do it again. I want him to stroke my hair.

Ellen: Your lovely hair. Like this, Betty?

Betty: I want him to put his arm around my waist.

Ellen: Like this, Betty?

Betty: Yes, oh I want him to kiss me again.

Ellen: Like this, Betty? [*Ellen kisses Betty*]" (Churchill 271).

This could be read as a textual expression of Irigarayan “two-ness” which allows the space for the expression of desire outside of the symbolic language of the phallus.

However, the enacted performative or enacted text contradicts the textual due to Churchill's stage directions. Betty is cross-cast as a man (specifically Anthony Sher in the 1979 and 1980 performances) who is quite literally "coming face to face with the others." According to Harding this casting creates a paradoxical theatrical semiotic code when "the textual appropriation of heterosexual discourse for covert lesbian expression gives way to a stage performance that erases the lesbian act with the lips of a man and a woman" (261). In this instance *Cloud Nine* falls short in the creation of a space for the expression of the feminist (un)aesthetic due to its reliance on the symbolic language of the patriarchy to express lesbian desire.

Although this critique of *Cloud Nine*'s reduction of difference within the category of "woman" is warranted, when the goals and focus of second wave feminism in England are considered the play text can be viewed as successful as a consciousness-raising piece that carries implications outside of the theatrical event. Through its conceptualization of gender as a social construction and a focus on "her-story" *Cloud Nine* achieves a treatment of subjectivity and form that meets the goals of second wave feminism. In her essay "On Feminist and Sexual Politics," Janelle Reinfelt notes *Cloud Nine*'s importance as an instrument through which the feminist concerns of the time were voiced.

According to Reinelt, "*Cloud Nine* perfectly matched its content and form with the zeitgeist of the time-it captured the tumultuous project of sexual experiment in its utopian aspect while equally capturing the confusion and pain of rapid social change" (27). As a cultural artifact of the late 1970s early 1980s in Britain the dramaturgy of *Cloud Nine* is indicative of the second wave feminism and like many cultural artifacts of the second wave is now under critical debate by contemporary feminist theorists. The relative young

age of feminist theatre during the time of Churchill's writing created a climate in which "political expediency encourages a sacrifice of difference in defense of difference" (Harding 262). However, a rejection of *Cloud Nine* is not prudent for feminist theatrical theorists. Churchill's first critically acclaimed script can be studied for its many successes in meeting the goals of a materialist feminist (un)aesthetic particularly in its treatment of subjectivity and form. The use of Brechtian elements in *Cloud Nine* can serve as an example of creating a theatrical contract that encourages action outside of the theatre. When these elements are considered *Cloud Nine* can be read as successful in meeting the goals of the feminist (un)aesthetic through the creation of an Irigarayan theatrical language of refusal. As Reinelt notes, "[*Cloud Nine*] is the best example of the reasons why Churchill has been an inspiration to feminists in theatre and performance studies" (27).

In *Cloud Nine*, Churchill achieves a destabilization of the immobile eye [I]. The meta-narrative created by the male gaze is disrupted by Churchill's refusal to stage the natural present. The first act of *Cloud Nine* is set "in a British colony in Africa in Victorian times" and the audience is immediately prevented from making strong emotional connections to the characters presented for their observation (248). This refusal of the visual language of the present prevents the quick and easy hierarchical ordering by forcing the audience to "decode" the setting of the action. This Brechtian technique of historization is used by Churchill to create an intellectual environment in which the audience becomes aware of their own culturally gendered reading of events. In Act One, Scene Two when Betty initiates a game of catch with Ellen, the sexual politics of the Victorian colony become clearly legible.

[Betty takes a ball from the hamper and plays catch with Ellen. Murmurs of surprise and congratulations from the men whenever they catch the ball.]

Edward: Mama, don't play. You know you can't catch a ball.

Betty: He's perfectly right. I can't throw either.

[Betty sits down. Ellen has the ball.]

Edward: Ellen, you don't play either. You're no good. You spoil it.

[Edward takes Victoria from Harry and gives her to Ellen. He takes the ball and throws it to Harry. Harry Clive and Edward play ball.]

Betty: Ellen, come sit with me. We'll be spectators and clap,

The stage directions load the textual language with signs of the sexual politics of Victorian colonialism (265). Betty is the one who found the ball and began the game, however, she is physically stopped by the verbal command from her male child. Not only does Betty stop playing the game with Ellen, she physically assumes a passive spectator role which limits her participation to clapping and minding the children. In her article "(In) Visible Bodies In Churchill's Theatre," Elin Diamond notes one of the effects of this historization: "Spectators are prevented from identifying emotionally with any single action or character, but are encouraged to make connections between a previous historical period and their own" (193). When connections are drawn between the past and the present, participation in a game of ball can be read as a symbol for participation in cultural discourse, politics, and/or capitalism. In this way Churchill's refusal to stage the natural present is made political by her use of Brechtian historization, which alienates the audience.

The effects of this historization are so subversive to the male gaze that when the present is presented in the second act it appears to the audience as anything but natural. This destabilizing of the immobile eye [I] serves to demystify the connection between the ways in which gender meaning has been constructed in past and contemporary societies. Churchill couples a refusal to stage the natural present with a further rejection of realism. This creates the space for the development of an Irigarayan language and lays the foundation for the (un)aesthetic. The narrative structure of *Cloud Nine* deconstructs the way meaning is created through a jump in diachronic time. The setting of the narrative jumps from “a British colony in Africa in Victorian times” to “London in 1979. But for the characters it is twenty-five years later” (248). This jump serves Churchill’s materialist feminist goals by dramatizing the effects of the past on the material reality of the present. By juxtaposing the alien distant past with the cultural reality of her audience, *Cloud Nine* reinforces the political message of historization. In her article “*Refusing the Romanticism of Identity: Narrative Interventions in Churchill, Benmussa and Duras*,” Elin Diamond explains the political implications of the time jump, stating that, “By disturbing diachronic time Churchill lays bare the problematic of history and female identity” (278).

In the introduction to *Cloud Nine*, Churchill explains the connection between the act structure and empowerment. According to Churchill, “the first act, like the society it shows, is male dominated and firmly structured. In the second act, more energy comes from the women and the gays. The uncertainties and changes in society, and a more feminine less authoritarian feeling are reflected in the looser act structure” (246). The effects of this rejection of realistic representation can be most clearly seen in the

character of Victoria. Victoria is played by a dummy or doll in act one, and is transformed in act two into a woman who speaks in the convincing and recognizable feminist jargon of the time. Although drastically different in representation the doll Victoria and the feminist Victoria constitute a multifaceted presentation of feminine subjectivity in one character. Therefore the materiality of the doll has an undeniable impact of the materiality of the feminist. In Act Two, Scene One Lin confesses to Victoria that she hates men. Victoria responds “You have to look at it in a historical perspective in terms of learnt behavior since the industrial revolution” (Churchill 292). Although, the feminist theory behind Victoria’s statement creates room for critique of history which could lead to change in the present, there is an air of acceptance to Victoria’s statement. Although Victoria is aware of the ways in which meaning is created, this does not free her feminist thinking from her voiceless past. This representation dramatizes Spivak’s conceptualization of the inability or the subaltern speaking. This problematic shows the need for the intervention of Churchill’s narrative.

The episodic structure of *Cloud Nine* coupled with the alienating jump in time combine with a historization in a way that refuses to present a single closed meaning of the play text for audiences. Victoria tells Lin the historical metanarrative of how gender difference came to be the way it is in 1979. “It is this story that Churchill puts into question...preventing the spectator from producing a coherent narrative within the boundaries of the play’s dramatic structure,” Anne Herman notes in her article “*Travesty and Transgression: Transvestism in Shakespeare, Brecht, and Churchill*” (149). In this way Churchill successfully creates space for a subversive presentation of the feminist (un)aesthetic, and specifically the (un)subject by refusing to present singular, defined,

audience-created text. In “Questioning and Empowerment,” Amelia Howe Kritzer quotes Caryl Churchill’s definition of the job of a playwright as, “playwrights don’t give answers, they ask questions” (1). In *Cloud Nine*, Churchill uses non-linear narrativity to deconstruct the way the theatre constructs meanings of gender difference, disrupting the metanarrative which is structured by the patriarchal male gaze created by its audience. *Cloud Nine* demonstrates that the expression of Irigarayan two-ness begins with a refusal of the traditional one-ness of theatre. Churchill’s success in asking questions, thereby exposing and destabilizing the traditional way of seeing, allows for alternative subject creation.

Although *Cloud Nine* predates Halberstam’s conceptualization of shadow feminism’s (un)subject, Churchill confronts her audience with a similar aesthetic of refusal which is used to serve the goals of the (un)aesthetic. The audience is challenged to question the way the meaning of gender difference is created within theatrical texts through Churchill’s presentations of feminine subjectivity. Amelia Kritzer explains the intent behind the theatrical experimentation of *Cloud Nine*, “Churchill reorients the theatre in a number of ways to admit the possibility of a non-patriarchal subjectivity” (Questioning 13). In order to reorient the theatre to show the material nature of gender difference Churchill combines the formalism of de Lauretis with the (un)subject of Halberstam through the alienating techniques of Brecht. The resulting representations of feminine subjectivity refuse traditional “natural” femininity while offering no single place holder. The open-ended questions posed by Churchill’s dramaturgy not only encourage audiences to consider multiple answers, they also allow for the possibility that there is no single right answer. In this way Brecht’s “thinkers theatre” is adapted to

create a new language of feminine subjectivity by refusing the comfortable subject/object binary. Victoria and Betty present the audience with different subject formations that are grounded on the refusing quality of the (un)aesthetic. Through these presentations of subjectivity Churchill exposes the political quality of hierarchies based on the world “as you see” (Churchill 251).

The representation of Victoria refuses the patriarchal economy of sexualized signs and exposes the limits of the signifying body when restricted by such a system. In the opening act of *Cloud Nine*, the idealized Victorian daughter, Victoria, is played by a dummy. In this representation Churchill completely removes the signifying body from the visual language of the performance. This removal denies the audience the signs of a feminine body. This refusal serves a visceral comic purpose as well as a serious exploration of “a certain obsession with the signifying limits the performing body” (Diamond 189). The audience of *Cloud Nine* is first introduced to Victoria during the highly theatrical introductory song. “[Clive presents Victoria, who is a dummy, Maud and Ellen.] No need for speeches by the rest/My daughter, mother-in law and my governess,” even when reading this passage the communal snicker of the audience at the presentation of Victoria can be felt (Churchill 252). The absurdity of Clive’s action in this passage serve to create a comic atmosphere as the audience watches a living body interact with a stage prop. Because the audience finds the voiceless and bodiless Victoria funny they will be more likely to see other characters’ interactions with her in a new way, or as alien. Clive’s interaction with Victoria is an example of what Kritzer calls a Churchillian “choice of unusual subjects that offer, in Brechtian terms, ‘pleasurable learning, cheerful and militant learning’” (Songs 191). Immediately after the audience

sees Victoria she is placed in the category of “woman” by the verbal juxtaposition with the corporeal women, Maud and Ellen. Within the first few pages of *Cloud Nine* the unusual subject position created by a dummy representation exposes the rigid nature of gender creation within a social system. “Vitoria *is* a dummy,” and with Maud and Ellen she becomes “the rest” (Churchill 252). The voiceless “rest” demonstrate the representational violence of forcing women to speak from a subaltern or othered position. The “seen but not heard” reality of these women’s narrative is reinforced as Victoria’s total lack of selfhood is juxtaposed with the lack of “speeches by the rest” (Churchill 252). The bizarre subject position created for dummy Victoria becomes a symbolization of the need for a representational system which is not one, or the (un)aesthetic.

By creating a blank slate representation which refuses to perform outward signs of gender Churchill demonstrates the way gender is written onto subjects. This voiceless representation of femininity demystifies the harmful nature of patriarchal subject creation. In his article “Make Us The Women We Can’t Be; *Cloud Nine* and The Female Imaginary,” Marc Silverstein explains the symbolic meaning of Victoria’s dummy representation. According to Silverstein, Victoria cannot be represented because she “lacks a body that can ‘accede to its own specific symbolization,’ Victoria lacks *any* body...the ‘figure’ of Victoria serves to link the female body’s exile from authentic symbolization to women’s exclusion from ‘the nature of words’ within the patriarchal Symbolic.” (Silverstein uses Lacan’s terminology from Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne) (11). Later as Victoria is comically tossed around the stage her “body” absorbs the blows of a patriarchal representational system which bars women from participation in the symbolic by marking “woman” as the sex which is not

one. By making the representational violence of patriarchy comical Churchill translates the violence of the symbolic order to the realm of the sensory and corporeal. Diamond notes that this ‘casting’ serves to foreground the way “the mystification of the body in representation has come to serve as a metaphor for the concealments of human, and especially female experience, under patriarchy” ((In) Visible Bodies 191). The formalist deconstruction of subject formation refuses the fetishistic and voyeuristic foundation of traditional subject creation, as described in Chapter One by Laura Mulvey. This leads the audience to ask, is a dummy as representation of a feminine subject really that absurd?

In Act One, Scene One Clive shares a comic moment with his daughter that dramatizes the tragedy of women being forced to live a narrative that is not their own due to their inability to access symbolic language. After a reassuring display of Clive’s manly mastery of the domain, his wife Betty and mother Maud,

[Ellen comes carrying Victoria, age 2. Edward, aged 9, lags behind]

Betty: Victoria, my pet, say good evening to papa.

[Clive takes Victoria on his knee.]

Clive: There’s my sweet little Vicky. What have we done today?

Betty: She wore Ellen’s hat.

Clive: Did she wear Ellen’s hat like a lady? What a pretty.

Betty: And Joshua gave her a piggy back? Tell papa. Horsy with Joshy?

Ellen: She’s tired.

Clive: Nice Joshy play horsy. What a big strong Joshy. Did you have a gallop? Did you make him stop and go? Not very chatty tonight are we?
(Churchill 256).

When Clive “takes Victoria on his knee” the audience is visually prompted to read the proceeding interaction as a ventriloquist act as Clive, and therefore Betty, speak through Victoria. Even the grammatical subject of Clive’s question “What have we done today?” dispossess Victoria of her own experience and her ability to communicate it. Victoria’s inability to become the subject of her own narrative is a result of lack of access to the symbolic order that is dramatized by her dummy representation. Anne Herrmann notes that “Characters are their discourses and their discourses are often someone else’s. Sexual stereotypes are parodied and deception,” (or mystification), “virtually disappears” (150). Clive and Betty continue to question Victoria, who remains a dummy. Victoria’s silence is dismissed as her own shortcoming by Ellen “She’s tired,” and patronizingly explained away by Clive “Not very chatty tonight are we?” (256). These responses attempt to explain away Victoria’s dummy status that would prevent her from answering no matter how “sleepy” or “chatty” she may feel. Because Victoria’s representation is constructed as a dummy she will never be able to take up her own discourse, which eventually proves boring to Clive who “[*tosses Victoria to Betty*]” (257).

By symbolizing the problematics of female subjectivity, Victoria’s dummy representation shows the need for an Irgigaryian system and the (un)subject. Even Victoria’s act two representation as a feminist woman does not achieve subjectivity because she is still speaking the language of the patriarchy. All of the empowering jargon used by Victoria is still presented to the audience, who then tries to make it legible through the traditional symbolic order. In Act Two, Scene Three Victoria, Edward and Lin meet in a dark park to perform a religious rite/orgy, a sexual intervention of

heteronormative desire. Victoria performs an invocation of the goddess Isis to preside over their sacred ceremony

Goddess of many names, oldest of the old, who walked in chaos and created life, hear us calling you back through time, before Jehovah, before Christ, before men drove you out and burnt your temples, hear us, Lady, give us back what we were, give us the history we haven't had, make us the women we can't be (Churchill 308).

The group is not given a goddess. Instead Martin, Victoria's apologetic husband, stumbles upon the ceremony and reads it through his patriarchal code and pronounces, "well that's alright. If all we are talking about is having a lot of sex there's no problem. I was all for the sixties when liberation just meant fucking" (Churchill 310). Martin's classification of "just fucking" becomes a proscription that reframes what was presented to the audience as a liberatory ceremony to invoke the idea of a time "before Jehovah, before Christ." Martin's statement forces Victoria's subject position to be viewed through the traditional subject/object economy which reads her intervention as "just fucking." The goddess cannot appear to give them the history they have not had. Women cannot simply be inserted into a male discourse and be made into the subjects they can't be. As Silverstein notes, "When Victoria asks Isis to '*make* us the women we can't be,' she implicitly acknowledges that any subject position in which women appear emerges through a representational practice; that the problem is not how to escape signification, but how to create an oppositional signifying space in which to answer the question, 'what about me?'" (13). Churchill uses the dual and paradoxical representation of Victoria to demonstrate the unavoidable failure of feminine subjectivity within a

patriarchal system. In Victoria the audience sees a dramatization of the need for a representational system based on the refusal of the (un)aesthetic. In the character of Betty, Churchill provides a possible avenue for the creation of a refusing Irigarayan (un)aesthetic.

Betty's representation is the product of deconstructive formalism and Brechtian elements. By combining cross-gender casting and nonlinear narrativity Churchill creates a feminist representation of refusal, the (un)subject. Betty occupies an (un)subject position due in part to the Brechtian alienation created by her cross-gendered casting. When coupled with the dummy representation of Victoria, the man version of Betty serves to reinforce a central theoretical materialist framework of the (un)aesthetic. Gender is portrayed as a social construction by replacing the feminine body with large burly man. Churchill effectively deconstructs gender essentialism as noted by Kritzer in "Sex and Gender": "This cross-casting makes gender visible by separating feminine gender and the female body" (113). The effects of this cross-gender casting can be seen on a literary level in Betty's introductory speech in Act One, Scene One. Betty steps out of the opening tableaux, which is framed by the Union Jack, and speaks directly to the audience,

I live for Clive. The whole aim of my life

Is to be what he looks for in a wife

I am man's creation as you can see,

And what men want is what I want to be (Churchill 251).

Betty's final line, "as you can see," highlights the material nature of gender construction by placing what the audience can see in opposition to what they are told. In her article

“Travesty and Transgression: Transvestism in Shakespeare, Brecht, and Churchill,” Anne Herman provides the theoretical context of Betty’s introductory speech. According to Herman, these words when presented by a man that has adopted the signifiers of a woman, demonstrate that, “to be ‘a man’s creation’ means to conform to masculine expectations not by mimicking the misogynist or murdering the feminine, but by leaving nothing to the woman except the name and the clothes” (150). By displaying the individual signs of femininity Churchill demonstrates that what a woman “is” has been constructed by a man and is not dependent upon a female body for representation. The dissonance created by Churchill’s refusal to display the female body creates a space between the character and the actor. In her essay “Refusing the Romanticism of Identity: Narrative Interventions in Churchill, Benmussa, Duras,” Elin Diamond explains how this casting is based on the refusal to force a feminine portrayal of “man’s creation.” According to Diamond, “the point is not that the male is feminized but that the female is absent. What remains is a dress, a palpitation, a scream, all encoded female behaviors adding up to a trace denoting absence. The woman Betty is not represented, she lacks symbolization in culture” (278). By refusing to restrict Betty into a “one-ness” of patriarchal symbolization Churchill effectively creates a literary framework for the creation of a refusing (un)subject. However, in order for the creation of the (un)subject to be read as subversive by the audience the performance text of Betty must be presented through the alienating Brechtian style of “not/but” acting.

If in production the role of Betty is performed within the realistic theatrical contract (either by a woman or by a male actor who hides his maleness) she will not be read by the audience as an (un)subject. Such a performance will fail to meet the

(un)aesthetics' goal of creating an environment of questioning that extends beyond the door of the theatre. The gap between the character's gender and the actor's has to be highlighted in order for a production to effectively break the gendered representation system. As Laura Mulvey notes in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the male actor playing Betty breaks the voyeuristic and fetishizing framework of traditional subjectivity. Mulvey notes, "According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the physical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like" (63). Rhonda Blair directed a production of *Cloud Nine* in 1985 and she discusses the efficacy of her production's presentation of Churchill's political message. In "'Not...but'/'Not-Not-Me': Musings on Cross-Gender Performance," Blair retrospectively deconstructs her creation of the performance text. Blair notes that after attending a dress rehearsal a radio reporter asked her why she chose to cast a female actor as Betty in act one. "I didn't. That was a man," responded Blair, who then gives an account of a rehearsal process in which the actor playing Betty related to her through the emotional becoming of a character through realism (269).

In this case, because the actor playing Betty was not recognized as a man, Betty was not presented as an (un)subject, which breaks down the Irigarayan language of two-ness presented in the gestic image at the conclusion of the play. The melding between actor and character was so seamless the actor playing Betty "became" her rather maintaining his own masculine identity. Kritzer explains the link between the "not/but" and the gestic image: "The inconsistency between Betty's gender and sex sets up a reciprocity between player and role that exposes every gesture and speech to question, as

each gesture or speech becomes a gest of gender construction” (120). This reciprocity was not used by Blair as a tool to extend the political message of Churchill beyond the physical and temporal space of the theatre itself. In the production the performance text was read in opposition to the play text of Churchill. The alienation effect was not established by this production therefore the political power of the double casting as well as the cross-gender casting of Betty was disarmed. Blair questions, “[D]oes cross-gender casting count if the gender of the performer is erased? I do not think it did in this case...the process by which we set up our performance code did not work for some audience members, for they did not fully understand that ‘Betty’ was male until after the performance, i.e, they could not ‘read’ it right” (296). The act one male presentation of Betty as “man’s creation” is meant to serve as a point of reference for the female expression of jouissance presented in act two, which is fundamental in the expression of the (un)aesthetic.

Churchill presents two contrasting representations of Betty in order to present feminine subjectivity in a constant state of becoming. The double casting of Betty as a man and a woman prevents the audience from viewing her as a single unchanging entity. Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond explain one of the intentions of the double casting of Betty. “Double casting also undermines identity, throwing our focus not in individual agents but on the form and patterns of the whole” (9). As Betty cultivates her own feminine identity she is still read by the audience against the male Betty of act one. Throughout the second act Betty becomes empowered and is able to represent her own desires rather than be forced to perform herself through a distinctly masculine body. The visual representation of Betty as a woman performing her own femininity is read by the

audience as more authentic than the expression of Betty's desires in act one. This allows Churchill to express that change in sexual politics as well as symbolic expression is possible. In "Toward a Materialist Feminist Criticism," Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt describe the theory of the utilizing double casting and a jump in dramatic time: "It is a way of seeing that prompts us to locate on the same situation the forces of oppression and the seeds of resistance; to construct women in a given moment of history simultaneously as victims and agents" (22). Churchill locates "the seeds of resistance" in act two Betty's ability to express her own desire through language that describes the pleasure found in her own two-ness.

In Act Two, Scene Four Betty is able to express her own pleasure and desire outside of the language of patriarchy. Betty as played by a woman delivers a monologue that demonstrates her discovery of her feminine identity alone on stage.

I thought if Clive wasn't looking at me then there wasn't a person there.
And one night in bed in my flat I was so frightened I started touching myself. I thought my hand may go through space. I touched my face, it was there, my arm, my breast, and my hand went down where I thought it shouldn't and I thought well there is somebody there. It felt very sweet...and I felt myself gathering together more and more...afterwards I thought I had betrayed Clive. My mother would kill me. But I felt triumphant because I was a separate person from them (Churchill 316).

This moment is an expression of Irigarayan two-ness both within the play text as well as the performance text. Visually Betty is able to express her own pleasure as a woman because she is being played by a woman. This allows the audience to read this

monologue outside of the hierarchical ordering of the visual scene around a penis or symbolically around a phallus. When Betty tells the audience, “It felt very sweet,” she is describing her own desire and pleasure outside of the phallogentric order of symbolic representation. As Betty becomes “a separate person from them” she successfully breaks the restriction of being represented as “man’s creation.” The triumphant feeling of Betty’s self-discovery would be read through the fetishizing code of traditional representation if it was presented outside of the context of the male Betty of act one. In this monologue Betty is able to express her own pleasure and desire as a woman directly. Through the mouth of a man in act one Betty was only able to speak of her desire through the restricting language of patriarchy. Kritzer explains act one man Betty, who was the embodiment of everything Clive looked for in a wife, was only able to “express her desire indirectly, as a function of male desire for her” (117). This monologue is read with in the same theatrical context as the man Betty begging Harry, “Please want me” (Churchill 261). The nonrealistic cross and double casting when coupled with the shift in time allow Churchill to present a monologue in which “the fears and indecisions we see in Act II are lifted out of the causality of personal history and become evidence of the socio-sexual configurations we saw represented in Act I” (Refusing 278). According to Elin Diamond, “Churchill thus succeeds in semiotizing, making readable, the narrative history in which the parts for women are written by patriarchal law,” which allows the final gestic image of *Cloud Nine* to be read as an alternative narrative (Refusing 278).

In the final moments of *Cloud Nine* Churchill presents the audience with a gestic image that completely rejects the patriarchal language of traditional theatrical representation. In a dramatization of Irigarayan two-ness Churchill expresses the

(un)aesthetic through the (un)subject. In the stage directions Churchill describes the final tableaux of *Cloud Nine* Betty stands alone on stage then, “[Betty from Act One comes. Betty and Betty embrace]” (320). Churchill completely rejects a fixed and stable identity of oneness for Betty by presenting both Bettys on stage in an embrace. Churchill folds into a single frozen embrace many possible sexual identity pairings which allows for the meaning of the image to hold shifting and multiple meanings. Betty and Betty’s embrace can be read simultaneously as between two women, one woman, and a woman and a man while placing them all within a materially constructed context. According to Marc Silverstein, “Churchill thus stages an economy of female pleasure in which auto-eroticism, homo-eroticism and hetero-eroticism all coexist without competing for hierarchical pride” (19). The semiotic openness of this image would be lost without the rejection of realism, cross-gender casting, abrupt time shift, a breakdown of the active/passive economy of subjectivity and a materialist construction of gender. Churchill carefully constructed a formalist nontraditional theatrical event that would load this final gestic image with as many meanings as possible. As Silverstein notes, “Viewed from an Irigarayan perspective... closure and unity are disallowed by the image of the two Bettys, which, like the ‘two lips,’ are not divisible into one... it is precisely because this exchange is ‘ceaseless’ that the other can preserve its otherness, rather than being absorbed and cancelled within itself” (19). Silverstein goes on to argue that the embrace grants “authentic symbolization to the female body,” thus allowing the female to speak through the theatrical (un)aesthetic.

CHAPTER 3

“REP&REV”: THE BRECHTIAN REVISIONIST NARRATIVE OF THE (UN)SUBJECT IN *VENUS*

The material moment in which Suzan-Lori Parks wrote *Venus* equipped her with a more complex understanding of feminism and female oppression. The single narrative nature of second wave feminism was already destabilized by black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins in 1996, when *Venus* was first performed at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre in New York City. Although the dramaturgy of Parks differs from that of Churchill, both playwrights seek to affect society outside of the theatre by making narrative interventions which highlight the social construction of gender and create room for the presentation of the (un)subject. Suzan-Lori Parks inherited a different feminism from that of Churchill, based on the materiality of the late 1980s and 1990s. By understanding the cultural position of feminism and theatre of both playwrights, the differences between *Venus* and *Cloud Nine* can be viewed as points of coalition for a framing of the feminist (un)aesthetic.

In order to understand the cultural impact of *Venus* the theorization of black feminism has to be considered. Black feminism developed as a challenge to the essentialism of second wave feminist theory and race theory. Following in the theoretical footsteps of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, “Contemporary black feminism is interested in investigating the intersections of race, gender, class orientation and other

locations of identity,” according to Lisa M. Anderson in her book Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama (14). This understanding of intersectional identity as an evolving fluid and dialogic position at the intersection of multiple oppressions, allows Parks to further trouble the homogenous nature of “woman” and specifically “black woman” as sign. In this way the dramaturgy and feminism of Parks can be viewed as a further deconstruction of the feminist dramaturgy of Churchill. In Black Feminist Thought (1990), Patricia Hill Collins challenges the additive understanding of oppression of white second wave feminist thought, “First, Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift in how we think about oppression. By embracing a paradigm of race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, Black feminist thought conceptualizes the social relations of domination and resistance” (110). This line of thought does not allow for the partitioning of identity that serves to essentialize the female experience. Therefore the social concerns of Parks differ from those of Churchill due to her unique identity position as an intersectional subject, which allows for Parks to create a dramatic (un)subject position which refuses the unity of “woman.” According to Collins the matrices of oppression create a complicated system in which there are no pure oppressors or oppressed people; “Depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed” (14). The effects of Collins’s theorization of black female subjectivity can be seen in Parks’ *Venus*, which challenges one dimensional approach of understanding the cultural representation of black women by raising complex questions of complicity.

The conceptualization of black female identity was further deconstructed by the theories of bell hooks. Hooks’ theorization of the black female gaze as well as the

colonized mind help to understand Park's dramaturgical goals within the framework of the refusing (un)aesthetic and (un)subject. Like Collins, hooks is concerned with the effects of representations of black women on the cultural assumptions about the socially constructed category of "black woman." The ability to look, according to hooks, is a political act that is often denied to marginalized groups. In her article "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectatorship," hooks explains the historical forces that shape the political implications of access to the gaze, "I read in history classes that white slave-owners (men, women, and children) punished enslaved black people for looking...The politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze" (115). As intersectional subjects black women have been doubly denied the ability to utilize the gaze. The "trauma" of a racialized spectator economy creates a special intersectional relationship within the black female spectator because she is doubly denied the gaze due to her gender (as described by Mulvey) and her race. The political ramifications of female black looking is theorized by hooks as "confrontational, as gestures of resistance, challenges to authority" (115). This theoretical concern with black female spectatorship was very prevalent in the works of black feminists during the time Suzan-Lori Parks was writing *Venus*. Her dramaturgy uses narrative interventions to shift the balance of the gaze, which allows room for the expression of feminine desire through the (un)subject. Like Churchill, Parks destabilizes the male gaze. However, her material concerns regarding intersectionality allow her to further deconstruct the gaze by exposing the subject/object economies as racialized *and* gendered.

In *Venus*, Parks dramatizes the effects of colonialism on the creation of cultural images of black women in the hopes of destabilizing their constructs to serve her

(un)aesthetic goals. In the 1990s there was a surge in black feminist theory with a focus on the “colonized body/identity” (Anderson 13). Black feminist of the 1990s sought to deconstruct the sexualized and essentialized identities created by European colonization that remained impactful on contemporary cultural representations of black femininity. In “Rebel’s Dilemma,” bell hooks discusses her personal dichotomy and paradox of representation with academia. Hooks describes her own relation of representation autobiographically: “From childhood on I have had to struggle to break from the impositions of images that didn’t represent me accurately or well,” (1). In this description there was no time in her life when hooks did not feel a separation between her identity and how society wanted her to present herself. The struggle for representation is not only played out within society but within the individual consciousness of the intersectional subject. The cultural images of black women have been colonized to form a hetero-patriarchal sign system that codes the female black body for white and black male’s consumption. This cultural coding is so pervasive and historically rooted that these images become the internal measuring stick of black femininity within society and the individual. As hooks notes,

Much of that struggle begins with challenging sexist and racist stereotypes that offer such a flat vision of black female identity. Since practically everyone is socialized to expect certain behavior from black females (including black females) one of the most useful interventions has been feminist critical discussion that both defines what the imposed stereotypes are and offers both strategies of resistance and alternative ways to construct self and identity (4).

The ubiquitous nature symbolic culture is highlighted by hooks here: “everyone is socialized to expect...including black females.” Because black women have been denied the control of the creation of the “sexist and racist stereotypes,” they are “flat” and do not account for the complexities of intersectional subjectivity. The flatness of the stereotypes makes them easier to digest, which creates an environment of internalized oppression as they become expected of black women by everyone “including black women.” This creates a multidimensional consciousness that exists in a state of shifting tension, or as hooks calls it, “the process of decolonization.” Through the presentation of historical images in *Venus*, Parks furthers the process of decolonization within the world of the play and within the greater cultural context.

Parks’ dramaturgy is influenced by this focus on materiality of “black woman” as sign and uses the techniques of the (un)aesthetic to demonstrate the artificiality of this sign as well as offer “alternative ways to construct self and identity” (hooks 4). This dramaturgical focus is a result of the growth of feminist theatrical theory as well as black feminist theory in the 1990s. Which led to what Lisa Anderson calls “the realization of the black feminist aesthetic” that led to an “impressive increase in dramas written by black women many of which [Anderson] considers black feminists” (13). Like Churchill, Parks intends to deconstruct the ways in which gender difference is a social construction. However, Parks further deconstructs the category of woman by challenging its white homogeneity. The construction of the “black woman” as sign has a unique history and relationship to individual’s presentation of the self. As Anderson, notes troubling the metanarrative of black femininity is a goal of the black feminist aesthetic which,

“continues to be concerned with the images of black women in the popular imagination as well as in popular culture” (14).

The goals of Parks are expressed through her use of alienation and historization, which opens *Venus* up to an (un)aesthetic critique. The nontraditional dual narrativity of *Venus* is used by Parks to highlight and manipulate the sexualized and racialized economies of viewing the black female body. This is indicative of an alignment between the goals and techniques of what Freda Scott Giles calls “womanist theatre” and “post-Afrocentric dramatic theory” during the third wave³. Lisa Anderson notes Giles’ theorization of this alignment in Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama, “the view of time as circular rather than linear...the blurring of the lines between performer and audience. The rebellious and irreverent use of the language of the colonizer to forge a cultural identity for the colonized, the re-visioning of Eurocentric and Afrocentric imagery and symbolism...major precepts of post-Afrocentric dramatic theory also significantly are present in womanist drama” (14). These concerns are dramatized by Parks through alienation and narrative intervention which create an (un)subject position based on a new economy of refusal. By “re-visioning” and “blurring” the signification of Saartje Baartman, *Venus* challenges the audience to understand the Venus Hottentot as an (un)subject that seeks agency by a conscious manipulation of the presentation of black femininity. In this way the (un)aesthetic is challenged by Parks to remain fluid, self-reflexive, and open to the material goals of the playwright and feminist theory. This prompts a deconstructive reading of *Venus* that searches to determine “the elements of text or performance that invoke a particular history, politics, and philosophy of a

³ Although the wave categorization of feminism is troubling to some feminist theorists I use it here to refer to the feminist movement of the late 1980s and the 1990s.

‘community’ (broadly constructed),” which Anderson explains as the goal of a study of a black feminist aesthetic (16).

Like Churchill in *Cloud Nine*, Parks uses Brechtian historization to highlight the material construction gender difference that connects the “historical” past with the audiences present. Although the historical woman Saartje Baartman lived in the early nineteenth century, Parks tells her story with an emphasis on the way she became defined by her body which then became a symbol for black femininity. In the list of roles proceeding *Venus*, Parks represents The Venus as a construction. By naming her protagonist “Miss Saartje Baartman, A.K.A. The Girl, and later The Venus Hottentot,” Parks demonstrates the ways Miss Saartje Baartman is rewritten as The Venus Hottentot (4). This not only serves to alienate the audience by resisting her singularity as a presented sign, it also distances the audience emotionally from The Venus because they are aware of her artificiality and the inevitability of her transformation. Parks is not attempting to bring Baartman a long-lost narrative. Rather Parks constructs the appropriation of Baartman’s anatomy, as a cause and a symptom of a racialized and gendered system of representation and signification. In fact throughout the action of *Venus* there is never a reference to Baartman by her name. In her article, “A Complex Resurrection: Race, Spectacle, and Complicity in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*,” Karen Ruth Kornweibel explains the damaging effects of the sexualized stereotype of black femininity on the identity of an intersectional subject. According to Kornweibel, “this naming of the figure of Venus and the multiple naming in general demonstrates her slippage in history-the fact that she is not known except in the various names she was given and which, in the end, relate more to her status as a symbol than as a person”

(67-68). Parks connects the creation of the symbol The Venus Hottentot to the state of contemporary sign “black woman” through her use of the historical freak show and medical audiences.

Suzan-Lori Parks reveals the political effect of looking within the freak show and pseudoscientific presentation of Saartje Baartman in the nineteenth century with presentation and inscription of black femininity in contemporary culture. This creates a Brechtian space of the (un)aesthetic, as who is watching whom becomes destabilized, thus prompting the audience to question their own consumption of “black woman” as a racialized and sexualized sign. In “Body Parts: Between Story and Spectacle in *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks,” Harry Elam and Alice Rayner explain the duality of presentation in *Venus*. According to Elam and Rayner, “Within the paradigm of spectacle, with riffs on the world of the theatre, on show business, and of the business of show business, *Venus* considers the politics of representation...the play does not just reflect the representation of the race and sex of nineteenth-century Venus, but reconstitutes it in the performance of the present” (69). The audience watches The Chorus watch The Venus as she is presented by The Mother-Showman, The Baron Docteur, and Suzan-Lori Parks. This positions the audience of the play *Venus* in a parallel position to the Chorus, which extends the critique of the economy through the past and into the present. Parks further reinforces the ways the past is reconstituted in the present through her use of anachronisms. When the Chorus is informed that there will not be a show tonight because The Venus Hottentot is dead, they demand a refund. “Outrage! Outrage! Gimme gimme back my buck!” (14). Although the freak show setting of 1810 alienates the audience from the visual consumption of The Venus Hottentot, Parks forces the audience

to connect the ticket purchased by the Chorus and by the audience. Gender and race are revealed to be constructs that have been inherited by the audience of *Venus* due to their own participation in the consumption of The Venus Hottentot.

Throughout *Venus* The Negro Resurrectionist not only supports the Brechtian technique of historization, he also serves to reject traditional narrativity through his role as the narrator or emcee of the performance. The Negro Resurrectionist is simultaneously outside the play event watching while his watching implicates him and make him an active player within the drama (in a way similar to the audience in the house). In her book Suzan-Lori Parks, Deborah R. Geis notes the double meaning of a Resurrectionist, “a ‘resurrectionist’ is a charismatic religious figure, like an emcee or a preacher, but he is also one who returns (or returns others) from the dead” (87). The Negro Resurrectionist opens *Venus* by exclaiming “The Venus Hottentot” then a few pages later regretfully informs the audience that, “The Venus Hottentot iz dead” (Parks 11). The Negro Resurrectionist has revived The Venus Hottentot before the eyes of the spectator so that her story that will lead to her death can be told night after night. The Negro Resurrectionist was once in the business of literally digging up dead bodies for medical studies. Although he “quit that line years ago,” he has become that role to the white men he works for, as The Grade-School Chum explains, “Once a *digger* always one” (Parks 153). Therefore although The Negro Resurrectionist is commoditized in a similar fashion to The Venus Hottentot by the white characters, ultimately he is implicated in the The Venus Hottentot’s oppression as he digs her up so The Baron Docteur and the audience can consume her body by watching her performance. In this way The Negro Resurrectionist serves to create a pose/watching (un)aesthetic economy

that disrupts the traditional voyeuristic economy that serves to reinscribe racial and gender division.

The formalist use of The Negro Resurrectionist alienates the audience of *Venus*, through his reading of scene names and footnotes. By reading the scene titles The Negro Resurrectionist reminds the audience of their active participation in a theatrical event. The audience is forced to acknowledge their own consumption of the performance of black femininity. After the death of The Venus Hottentot is pronounced by The Negro Resurrectionist he remains visible and informs the audience of the name of the new scene marking the end of the overture. Although the audience knows that The Venus Hottentot is dead, “Scene 31 May I Present You ‘The African Dancing Princess’/She’d Make a Splendid Freak” takes place at the beginning of the transformation of The Girl into The Venus Hottentot. Once The Negro Resurrectionist announces the title of the scene he joins the audience in watching The Brother and The Man convince The Girl to go with them to England where they will present her and her large rear end as a freak show attraction. Karen Ruth Kornweibel explains the effects of this Brechtian formalism in her article “A Complex Resurrection: Race, Spectacle, and Complicity in Suzan-Lori Parks.” According to Kornweibel, “The announcing of scenes by The Negro Resurrectionist along with the initial announcement of her death in the Overture creates a structure that simultaneously descends from Scene 31 to Scene 1, moves forward in the fictionalized life of The Venus Hottentot, and moves in a circle from her death to her death” (72). This structure allows Parks to present the construction of The Venus Hottentot beginning in her death, which creates a subjectivity in construction. The circular nature of Venus also implicates the audience. As The Venus is pronounced dead, resurrected, and

inevitably killed by exposure to the gaze of The Baron Docteur, The Chorus (in all their forms), The Negro Resurrectionist, The Mother-Showman and the audience.

The circular form of *Venus* also highlights the constructed nature of black femininity. As the ending of *Venus* re-becomes the beginning, the history of the representation of black woman becomes the present and future. According to Kornweibel, “This structure indicates the strong connection Parks wants to demonstrate between present and past. As the audience accompanies her in the digging back into and interrogating the past they are also digging right back up to a present in which the deadly stereotypes of the past are still in operation” (72). However, as Parks constructs the narrative of The Venus Hottentot she uses The Negro Resurrectionist to interrogate it and highlight the artificiality of the past and the present it created. Because The Negro Resurrectionist initially informs the audience that The Venus Hottentot is dead the following presentation of her life becomes questionable because it is a reconstruction and a remembering of the past displayed through the representation of black femininity in the present. This allows Parks to challenge the monolithic construction of “a knowable” past (Kornweibel 72). Therefore the narrative of *Venus* is not to be read as a “truth” about the historical woman Baartman. Parks deconstructs history without giving the audience a solid single narrative to replace it.

The multiplicitous (un)subject representation of The Venus Hottentot is possible by combining a circular structure and the narration of The Negro Resurrectionist. The political nature of Parks’ theatricalism is explained by Kornweibel: “The circular form of the play and the implied absence of the Venus also indicate the inaccessibility of the historical figure behind the myth...In the overture, Parks turns the focus from the

unavailable figure of the Venus to the viewers and to their frustrated desire to participate in seeing and consuming her” (72). This creates the space in which Parks can interrogate the social construction of gender and race without forcing the subaltern to speak. Parks further critiques the presentation of history and The Venus Hottentot through the use of footnotes that are read by The Negro Resurrectionist. In “Scene 12 Love Idhunt What/She Used To Be,” The Baron Docteur has taken The Venus to be studied by The Chorus of Anatomists. They take measurements of her living body, verbally dissecting her into her various consumable parts where she stands. Throughout Scene 12 and similar scenes with The Chorus of Anatomists it is mentioned that the various measurements taken of The Venus’ living body will, “of course be corrected after maceration” (Parks 122). In Scene 12 following this assertion The Negro Resurrectionist reads footnote number eight to the audience.

Footnote #8

Definition: Medical: *Maceration*

(*Rest.*)

‘A process performed on the subject after the subjects death. The subjects body parts are soaked in a chemical solution to separate the flesh from the bones so that the bones may be measured with greater accuracy’

(*Rest.*)

Later in “Scene 7 She’ll Make a Splendid Corpse,” after The Venus tells The Baron Docteur that she is pregnant she asks him the meaning of maceration. The Baron Docteur tells her, “‘Macerations’ French for ‘lunch.’ ‘After Lunch’ we always say” (Parks 141). Not only does the reading of the footnotes by The Negro Resurrectionist challenge the

knowable nature of true history, it highlight the construction of racialized and sexualized bodies. As Kornweibel notes, “This lie and the dual images on consumption-of the corpse and of food-is another unnerving example of Parks’s critique of how racialized bodies are constructed and to what purpose. By reading the footnotes, The Negro Resurrectionist gives the audience a dual perspective that makes perfectly evident The Baron Docteur’s perfidy” (76). The dual narrative of the footnotes and the narrative of the play’s action disrupts the fixed singular subject position of “black woman” as sign. By refusing to construct The Venus Hottentot as either as science subject or a woman in love, Parks uses the Negro Resurrectionist to open dramaturgical room for the creation of an (un)subject position.

By creating a dual narrative through the use of The Negro Resurrectionist Parks is able to create a gestic image that provides a visually coded expression of her political stance on the visual consumption of the “black woman” as sign. In “Scene 2 The Venus Hottentot Tells the Story of Her Life,” The Negro Resurrectionist serves as the death watch over The Venus Hottentot. According to the stage directions provided by Parks during the story of The Venus Hottentot “*The Negro Resurrectionist fingers his new gold coin*” that he takes from The Grade-School Chum although “*he feels like shit*” when he does (154-157). Parks has loaded the image of The Negro Resurrectionist fingering his new gold coin with gestic meaning due to his role as Brechtian narrator. Elam and Rayner note that The Negro Resurrectionist “controls the regimes of representation as emcee he is complicit in [The Venus Hottentot’s] exploitation” (274). This presentation reinforces the consciously refusing (un)subject position of The Venus by challenging the audience to connect the profit of The Negro Resurrectionist with the reinscription of

racialized and gendered representational. Not only is The Negro Resurrectionist (and therefore the audience) complicit in The Venus Hottentot death and resurrection as a sign there he gains a profit from it. As The Negro Resurrectionist “fingers his new gold coin” white heteronormative patriarchy “profits” from the consumption and commodification of racist sexualized images of black femininity. The gestic presentation is especially effective if the “not/but” acting style is utilized by a production of *Venus*. Parks uses this to lead the audience to question the narrative of The Venus Hottentot and its connection to the creation of the dying figure being watched by The Negro Resurrectionist and the audience.

In *Venus* Suzan-Lori Parks constructs a new theatrical language of the (un)aesthetic through her use of “Rep&Rev” and dramatic “spells.” These techniques serve to disrupt the gaze of the audience as well as create the narrative space necessary to implicate the audience in the cultural production of black femininity. By refusing traditional narrative techniques Parks is able to retell the story of the Venus Hottentot in a way that refuses the historically situated single image of black female desire created by white patriarchy. In “The Politics of Mimicry: The Minor Theatre of Suzan-Lori Parks,” Ilka Saal explains the political implications of Parks’ repetitive and revisionist language. According to Saal, “In particular, Parks has been praised for imaginative use of what she calls ‘Rep&Rev,’ repetition and revision, allowing here to submit a dominant and white historiography to a thorough process of fragmentation and revision, and thereby enabling the emergence of provocative counter narratives,” (57). This creates a tension between two narratives that encourages the audience to compare them, thus critiquing both. This prevents the audience from accepting either “original” text or the

“Rep&Rev” as a metanarrative. The fluidity of Parks’ narrative intervention preserves the intellectual distance between the audience and the play text. The circular and rhythmic form of *Venus* creates theatrical language which refuses the essentializing one-ness of the traditional narrative of Baartman, while destabilizing the immobile eye [I]. Through “Rep&Rev” Parks destabilizes “The Venus Hottentot” as a sign by, announcing her death immediately in choral fashion that carries the ritual weight of a Greek chorus.

THE NEGRO RESURRECTIONIST.

I regret to inform you that The Venus Hottentot iz dead.

ALL.

Dead?

THE BROTHER, LATER THE MOTHER-SHOWMAN.

There wont b innny show tonite.

THE CHORUS OF 8 HUMAN WONDERS.

Dead!

THE NEGRO RESURRECTIONIST:

Exposure iz what killed her, nothing on and our cold weather. 23 days in a row it rained. Thuh Doctor says she drank too much. It was thuh cold I think.

THE MAN, LATER THE BARON DOCTEUR.

Dead?

THE NEGRO RESURRECTIONIST.

Deh-duh.

THE BROTHER, LATER THE MOTHER-SHOWMAN.

I regret to inform you that The Venus Hottetntot iz dead. There wont b
inny show tonite.

THE NEGRO RESURRECTIONIST.

Diggidy-diggidy-diggidy-diggidy.

THE BROTHER, LATER THE MOTHER-SHOWMAN.

Im sure yr disappointed.

We hate to let you down.

But 23 days in a row it rained.

THE NEGRO RESURRECTIONIST.

Diggidy-diggidy-diggidy-dawg.

THE MAN, LATER THE BARON DOCTEUR.

I say:

Perhaps,

She died of drink.

THE NEGRO RESUERRCTIONIST.

It was thuh cold I think. (12)

During this scene The Venus is seen on stage revolving like a turntable to ensure that the audience gets a look at all of her angles. Through the repetition of “The Venus Hottentot iz dead” Parks immediately alienates the audience from the character Miss Sartje Baartman, A.K.A The Girl, later The Venus Hottentot, and forces the audience to reconcile The Venus’ pronounced death with her appearance on stage. If “The Venus Hottentot iz dead” then who is revolving in center stage? Which leads the audience to immediately question the narrative of her life as constructed by The Negro

Resurrectionist, who is digging her narrative out of history and her person out of the ground. The audience watches and listens as the death of The Venus is verbally constructed before them and with their help. The repetition and revision of “Dead” as a question, an explanation and finally a deconstructed “deh-duh” demonstrates to the audience how what becomes the narrative of The Venus is constructed by symbolic language. “Dead?” is repeated twice and followed by a reassertion of “Dead!” and then finally “deh-duh.” By breaking dead into its frenetic parts Parks creates a slower tempo in the last response which calls attention to itself as a break in the rhythm of the rest of the scene. “Deh-duh” also riffs on the slang of “duh” which finally presents the audience with the death as an obvious and unavoidable reality. In this way Parks revisits the life and death of Miss Sartje Baartman and re-appropriates the narrative of her transformation into the sign The Venus Hottentot. The performativity of the Rep&Rev deconstructs and reconstructs this narrative through dramatic performance that the audience is a co-author of. In “Suzan-Lori Parks and Liz Diamond: Doo-adiddly-dit-dit,” Steve Drukman notes the Brechtian effect of Rep&Rev, “the ‘Rep&Rev’ strategy keeps the spectator/reader ever vigilant, looking for something missed in the last repetition while scrutinizing the upcoming revision. Closure seems just on the horizon...where it remains” (57).

By refiguring and recreating the language of patriarchy Parks is successful in creating the space “between discourses” which allows for the expression of the (un)aesthetic, which is neither the dominant discourse nor created through forcing the subaltern into speaking through the other discourse. Deborah R. Geis notes in Suzan-Lori Parks, the way Rep&Rev creates a unique narrative that is grounded in performativity as explained by Ben-Zvi. “Parks is interested in the political effects of competing ways of

using language (cf. Venus): she ‘offers less a face beneath a mask a language beneath a language than a play between discourses’ (191)” (9). As Ben-Zvi notes, Parks does not seek to reveal “a face beneath a mask” or the authentic representation of the subaltern, which is in keeping with Spivak’s theorization and the (un)aesthetic. Parks disrupts the audience’s identification with the “dead” narrative by Rep&Rev-ing the cause of death while privileging neither as true. The Negro Resurrectionist asserts that, “Exposure iz what killed her, nothing on and our cold weather. 23 days in a row it rained. Thuh Doctor says she drank too much. It was thuh cold I think.” This prognosis is then deconstructed and repeated by The Mother-Showman and The Baron Docteur as a sort of script. This highlights the performative nature of the life of Baartman and the show the audience about to watch and create. Although the audience is told repeatedly “there wont b innny show tonite,” the Rep&Rev language is inherently theatrical. Parks does not offer new stable identity for Miss Sartje Baartman but forces the audience to create and recreate Baartman as The Venus Hottentot through narrative interventions. In “Elements of Style” Parks explains the performative nature of Rep&Rev, “In drama change, revision, is the thing. Characters refigure their words and through their refiguring of language show us that they experiencing their situation anew” (9). Not only does Parks highlight the performative nature of gender and race identity, she create a narrative that implicates the audience in its construction within the world of the play as well as in a larger cultural context. Because Rep&Rev refuses the stability of a singular narrative, the voyeuristic and essentializing economy of looking is denied and creates and expression of the (un)aesthetic and its (un)subject.

Traditional narrative and subject creation is further disrupted by Parks through her use of what she calls “spells.” Geis notes that in *Venus*, “Silence becomes strategic and intentional” (19). In the Author’s Notes proceeding *Venus* Parks explains the form and intent of a spell. According to Parks as spell is:

an elongated and heightened (rest). Denoted by a repetition of figures’ names with no dialogue. Has sort of an architectural look:

THE VENUS

THE BARON DOCTEUR

THE VENUS

THE BARON DOCTEUR

This is a place where the *figures experience their pure true simple state*.

While no action or stage business is necessary, directors should fill this moment as they best see fit (emphasis added) (7).

Parks elevates the presentation of the figures “pure true simple state” beyond the realm of the symbolic language of patriarchy. Because “directors should fill this moment as they best see fit” there are many connotations to the use of spells. Geis notes, “the term spell, of course conjures up multiple meaning: it is simultaneously a moment of magic or hypnosis, a spelling out of what two characters are feeling, and a folk idiom for an indefinite period of time (as in ‘sit down a spell’)” (20). The many meanings of the terms spell can be used in a single dramatic moment. Throughout *Venus* the “architectural” spells build moments that highlight the performance of “The Venus” by demonstrating her own participation in the creation of the sign of black femininity. Through the use of spells Parks manipulates time and space within a performance, as well as within the text,

which allows directors, actors and audience members a space to build emotions and transitions that cannot be expressed through the use of symbolic language.

In “Scene 24 ‘But No One Ever Noticed/Her Face Was Streamed with Tears’” Parks utilizes back-to-back spells to raise questions of audience complicity as well as Miss Sartje Baartman’s complicity in constructing identity as performance. Following The Mother-Showman’s insistence that The Venus turn to show off her “best angle” to The Chorus of Spectators, there is long spell between The Chorus of Spectators, The Mother-Showman, and The Venus. As The Venus turns to give The Chorus of Spectators the best angle she also presents herself and is presented to the audience as well. The “spelling out” of what all of the participants are feeling constructs a “moment of magic or hypnosis” that simultaneously captivates The Mother-Showman, The Chorus of Spectators, and the audience of *Venus*. In this way Parks actively engages the audience in the consumption of the sign The Venus, as they are not allowed to turn away. By implicating the audience this spell constructs a meta-theatrical moment that serves to connect the play text to the audience’s culture in a Brechtian style that is in keeping with the dramaturgical goals of the (un)aesthetic. Immediately following this spell

(*Rest.*)

(The Chorus erupts in wild laughter)

THE CHORUS OF SPECTATORS.

HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHAHAHAHAHA

HAHHAHHAHHAHHAHHAHHAHHAHHA

HAHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHNHNHNA

THE VENUS.

THE VENUS.

THE VENUS.

Hahahahahahahahaha! (56)

This spell is constructed between The Venus and herself with the characters on stage and the audience in the house waiting for her to act. Within the time and space occupied by this spell The Venus chooses to present herself to The Chorus of Spectators in a way that reaffirms their laughter. Parks notes in “Elements of Style” that a spell “is a place of great (unspoken) emotion. It’s also a place for an emotional transition” (16-17). The Venus decides to repeat the “wild laughter” with a revision of intensity that would add a forced or half-hearted quality to her own laughter. As Geis notes, “Parks’ spells on the page allow us to imagine the transition to their embodiment in performance, especially as a character’s identity is shaped in physical relation to another character” or in this case within themselves (21). The Venus’ identity is shaped by the previous spell by other characters, but within this spell she constructs herself as a consumable identity for The Chorus of Spectators, The Mother-Showman, and the audience. The complicity of The Venus in this spell draws from hooks’ theorization of the “colonized mind.”

“Scene 19 A Scene of Love (?)” is comprised entirely of a long spell between The Baron Docteur and The Venus which demonstrates the negotiated quality of the love (?) between them. Immediately following this scene The Baron Docteur procures The Venus from The Mother-Showman and transforms her into a kept mistress and an anatomy project. During the long spell

THE VENUS.

THE BARON DOCTEUR.

THE VENUS.

THE BARON DOCTEUR.

THE VENUS.

THE BARON DOCTEUR.

THE VENUS.

THE BARON DOCTEUR.

THE VENUS. (85)

There are no other characters presented, which gives the spell a suspended quality. Here Parks stops the momentum of the narrative that was previously built by “Scene 20J The Venus Hottentot Before The Law (Continued Historical Extract)” which ends in an uproar that The Baron Docteur calls to order. According to Geis, “The silence calls our attention to the ‘negotiation’ between the black body of Venus and the white, European body of the Baron Docteur” (82). The audience is given no visual clues and must fill in the distinct blank that this spell creates. The audience is left to construct the difference between the internal thoughts and emotions of both characters. The ambiguous nature of the spell allows for difference and similarity to be constructed simultaneously, perhaps The Venus and The Baron Docteur are both thinking about how to get what they want out of their encounter. The Venus wants to escape the limiting participation in the freak show and The Baron Docteur wants The Venus. The liminal space created by this spell creates a brief moment where anything could happen as both characters make emotional transitions and active decisions. As Geis explains, “These devices form part of Parks’ Brechtian structure, because such moments encourage a critical contemplation of characters and an awareness of their onstage transactions *as* transactions, thematizing

commodification and exploitation” in a way that is similar to the final gestic image of Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children*. The end result of this spell solidifies Miss Sartje Baartman becoming a sign of black femininity because The Baron Docteur will ultimately dissect her dead body and use it as pseudoscientific proof of racial and sexual difference. Through the use of Rep&Rev and spells Parks constructs a theatrical language that is capable of expressing an (un)subject that refuses the singular flat passivity of a sexualized sign of black femininity.

By utilizing Brechtian alienation and historization Parks creates a unique representational language that allows her to present Miss Saartje Baartman, A.K.A The Girl, and later The Venus Hottentot as a complicated (un)subject in becoming that refuses the singularity of a sexualized presentation of black femininity. Parks achieves this through reappropriating a voyeuristic gaze through The Venus Hottentot’s presentation of self. Saal notes that Parks is able to complicate the voyeuristic consumption of images through the use of the compound watching in *Venus*. According to Saal, “Parks does so most successfully when she alienates our desire in the refraction of our own gaze. Repeatedly Venus interrupts and breaks the cycle of voyeurism and consumption by looking back at her onlookers and, particularly, at us, the audience” (61). When The Venus invites the gaze of the audience and her onstage onlookers, she recreates a passive fetishized presentation of herself by restructuring the stage economy as pose/gaze. In “Scene 20I The Venus Hottentot Before the Law (Continued) (Historical Extract),” The Venus Hottentot is being questioned before The Chorus of the Court and the audience in the house. After a series of questions The Chorus of the Court attempts to get to the bottom of The Venus’ show:

THE CHORUS OF THE COURT.

One more question, Girl, uh:

Have you ever been indecent?

THE CHORUS OF THE COURT.

THE VENUS.

THE CHORUS OF THE COURT.

THE VENUS.

(Rest.)

“Indecent?”

THE CHORUS OF THE COURT.

Nasty.

THE VENUS.

Never.

No. I am just me.

THE CHORUS OF THE COURT.

Whats that suppose to mean?!?!

THE VENUS.

To hide yr shame is evil.

I show mine. Would you like to see? (Parks 83)

The single tragic interpretation of The Venus is rejected as Parks creates a character that is consciously constructed and displayed. The passivity of the sign of “woman” who is

styled unwittingly for the voyeuristic consumption of the male gaze is refused by The Venus who shows “her evil.” The Venus has never been “indecent” she has only been herself that she displays invitingly by asking, “Would you like to see?”

By expressing agency through the desire to show, The Venus Hottentot occupies an (un)subject position by refusing to be easily consumable. This allows Parks to riff on traditional representations of femininity by mimicking their construction. According to Saal, when “Seen from this angle, Park’s entire play strikes a purposeful pose of mimicry, reproducing not history or subaltern identity but our own fantasies and anxieties about these” (62). This mimicry refuses the category of “other” that is consumed by privileged identity groups in order to define and reinitiate their superiority. Although some critics have accused Parks of participating in a re-oppression of Saartjie Baartman, Parks’s use of the pose/gaze economy presents racial and gender oppression as a problematic. There is no longer a Saartjie Baartman, she has been transformed into a sign by history. All that is left is a cultural anxiety about what she has come to represent. When The Venus asks, “Would you like to see?” The Chorus of The Court cries, “Outrage! Ssanoutrage!” However, the audience remembers that The Chorus of The Court was once The Chorus of The Spectators and The Chorus of The Eight Anatomists (who in previous scenes masturbated to the image of The Venus), which demonstrates that the male and colonial gaze are based on looking when uninvited as a sign of dominance. By inviting the gaze Parks successfully disrupts the singularity of traditional black femininity. According to Saal, “Suddenly, we no longer consume her body, but gaze into the mirror of our own desires, stripped down to their bare essence and voided of their power to define and control” (62). In this way Parks successfully stages a feminist

(un)subject which foregrounds the construction of gender and race while simultaneously refusing to give them a body to be written upon. Parks does not present an essentialist retelling of the tragic story of Baartman, because as she says, “We should recognize this insidious essentialism for what it is: a fucked-up trap to reduce us to only one way of being” (Saal 67).

Conclusion

Both Caryl Churchill and Suzan-Lori Parks destabilize the cultural hegemony of patriarchy through interventions in dramaturgical form and subject positioning. Dramaturgically both playwrights create a staging economy of refusal that presents a narrative and a dramatic subject in a state of incompleteness and ceaseless becoming. Through the use of Brechtian staging techniques both Churchill and Parks represent gender difference as materially constructed through highlighting the cultural writing of difference on female bodies. By using the techniques of the (un)aesthetic both playwrights create an (un)subject position that refuses the singularity of “woman” as sign.

The refusal of the (un)subject in *Cloud Nine* as well as *Venus* uses the self-conscious intentionality of Halberstam’s un-subject within the theatrical form. Although there are differences in the goals of Churchill and Parks, both playwrights connect the dramatic performance of the (un)subject to the active deconstruction of the performance of gender identity within the larger cultural context. Through the (un)subject an expression of feminine desire is achieved outside of the vocabulary of patriarchal symbolic language. By complicating the way the meaning of “woman” is reflected and

recreated through theatrical language, Churchill and Parks further the work of feminist theorists by staging an (un)subject for audiences.

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